

**A Portfolio of Schools:  
Expanding Secondary Education Options in AISD by Creating Small  
Learning Communities, Small Schools, Charters/Choice, and New  
Specialized Schools**

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) is entering a new era of secondary education. While the mythology of American educational excellence has been punctured many times over since the flight of Sputnik, the efficacy of the American high school model, as depicted in *Dobie Gillis* or *Our Miss Brooks* in the 1950s or in the more recent *Boston Public*, has gone virtually unquestioned. Given the increasing demands of the global marketplace and the increasing levels of knowledge and understanding required for successful college completion and career success, we must begin to re-examine very carefully our current high school model to determine if it provides the greatest opportunity for student success. In order to do this, we must look inside the classroom at the curriculum and the methods of instruction. And we must look at the school model itself to make sure it provides the optimum opportunity for students with diverse needs and interests to maximize their potential for future college and career success.

This paper is intended to initiate a discussion on the best structural framework for AISD to consider to meet the rigorous educational demands of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. While the district has been hard at work improving the curriculum and instruction inside the classroom, this paper will look at the high school design choices available to a district looking to optimize academic achievement for all students in preparation for college and career success.

**Why Change?**

The Austin Independent School District is home to more than 80,000 students, who come from widely diverse backgrounds in terms of family income, family education, and native language. These students come to the high schools of AISD not only with differing backgrounds but also with a wide array of interests and career objectives. Our students need to be independent thinkers and problem solvers. They should all be prepared for college and career. They should be prepared for the complex, changing universe of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. They should be prepared to change jobs several times in their adult lives, bringing with them the ability to think deeply, communicate effectively, calculate solutions, understand the world they live in, and master technology. As they prepare for participation in our knowledge-based economy, many must overcome challenges in order to graduate. To meet all these needs, AISD must change the way we teach them.

The four-year high school completion rate for AISD was 80 percent in 2004. That's an increase of more than 10 percent since 2000. The four-year completion rate for AISD Economically Disadvantaged students has increased by 40 percent, but in 2004 it was still at 71.7 percent, meaning that almost three out of ten of our lower-income students were not graduating in four years. In 2004, the district's Limited English Proficient (LEP)

students' four-year completion rate was only 53 percent. Students in many of Austin's eleven comprehensive high schools have outstanding records of achievement, but a number of other students fall through the cracks, do not thrive, and either barely make it to the finish line or never quite get there.

The AISD Board of Trustees has established a set of policies to guide the district and has given priority to Board policy calling for high academic achievement for all students, while closing achievement gaps, and preparation of all students for college and successful careers. To meet the needs of AISD high school students preparing for adult life in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, AISD must look at a portfolio of high school options that will:

- ensure **rigor** in academic preparation;
- cement each student's **relationship** to his or her school and to school professionals monitoring that student's progress;
- instruct students in the **relevance** of their education to successful futures; and
- produce **results** in continuously improving student achievement.

### **Why Change Now?**

In addition to establishing the need for change, a school district must be ready for change and have the necessary tools to effect successful change. AISD is uniquely positioned to implement change on a broad scale.

First, recent research has shown that for viable, sustainable secondary reform to occur, a school district must have strong, stable governance and leadership. Since 1999, AISD has been led by a Superintendent-Board team committed to school success for every student.

Second, AISD has set the stage for high school redesign by building a solid teaching and learning infrastructure. AISD is now a standards-based, effort-based school district with an aligned, articulated curriculum that uses student assessment data to drive instructional decision-making. AISD has the same high state standards for all classrooms. The district's classrooms operate on the core belief that effort creates ability. Students become smarter by working harder in a system set up for high achievement.

Between 1999 and 2002, these efforts produced strong gains on the state's TAAS test. In that time, the number of exemplary and recognized AISD schools tripled from 16 to 48 and the number of low-performing schools declined from 14 to 3. With students facing the high-stakes consequences of the new, more rigorous TAKS tests in 2003, AISD's curriculum and instruction department teamed with master teachers to write Instructional Planning Guides to guide the curriculum in the core academic areas based on the TEKS standards. The District developed benchmark assessments to help track student achievement growth and instituted a three-tiered system to support struggling students in class, after school, and during the summer. Bilingual instruction was made more rigorous with attention given to teaching Academic English and Academic Spanish for all our English-Language Learners.

As a result, between 2003 and 2005, student achievement on the TAKS test increased for all groups of students, and the achievement gaps narrowed. For example, over the two-year period, AISD Hispanic students gained 16 points in Math, African American students gained 24 points in Science, and Hispanic and African American students gained 16 points each in Reading and 15 points in Social Studies. The percentage of students graduating on the Recommended or Distinguished High School Plan more than tripled between 2000 and 2005, rising from 24.1 percent to 73.6 percent.

AISD has also been working diligently with community partners to increase college admission for its graduates. The district is in the fourth year of its College Readiness Initiative, funded by the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, which provides extra academic and college counseling support for district high school students and has resulted in increased academic achievement, college enrollment and college scholarship aid. AISD is also in the culmination year of its federal GEAR UP grant, which is producing huge gains in college preparation for this year's senior class. In 2004, AISD and Austin Community College formed a College Connection, streamlining the transition between high school and enrollment in ACC, providing more than 80 percent of the 2004 AISD graduates with automatic admission into ACC.

### **Setting the Stage**

With the foundations for continuous academic improvement in place, the AISD Board and Administration secured the help of the Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) to analyze all our high schools. This analysis produced a report showing a common set of challenges for all AISD high schools. The seven major SREB recommendations were:

1. Give all students access to a rigorous academic core curriculum and a focused area of in-depth study.
2. Improve transitions from middle grades to high school and from high school to college and careers.
3. Improve the quality of instruction and raise classroom standards and expectations.
4. Expand career/technical education offerings aligned to post-secondary programs, industry standards, and labor-market demands and enroll more students in these programs.
5. Create a strengthened education and career advisement program through a teacher advisement system.
6. Strengthen the support system to help struggling students.
7. Develop strong building-level leadership teams involving principals, assistant principals, and teacher leaders.

AISD high schools have been working on different ways to address the challenges identified by the SREB report. Over the past three years, almost all AISD high schools have engaged in an examination of smaller learning community models through federal and state grants. While these smaller learning communities do not have the independent innovative power of small schools, they do provide the opportunity for district high schools to experiment with smaller communities of students and teachers, providing programs and services more responsive to student needs. They gave the high schools a way to begin changing their thinking related to size and student achievement. At the same

time, AISD is studying new high school models. These models include those that large comprehensive high schools may use to convert themselves into smaller education units. They include specialized, stand-alone small high schools. They include district charters.

In September 2005, each AISD comprehensive high schools began a formal process to develop a design proposal, which will be submitted in April 2006 for consideration by the Administration and the Board of Trustees. (With funding from the Texas Education Agency, Johnston High School began this process in the Spring of 2005 and opened as three academies under a Chief Academic Officer in August 2005.) The redesign process also includes the redesign of the district's central administration to better serve redesigned high schools.

### **A Portfolio of Secondary Options**

Given the varying needs of students, the wide range of possibilities for college study and career opportunities, and community interests, the Austin Independent School District is looking at developing a portfolio of high school options. The Administration and the Board recognize that one size will not fit all Austin high schools. The components of such a portfolio could include:

1. Small Learning Communities
2. Small Schools
3. Charter/Choice
4. New Specialized Schools

### **Small Learning Communities**

Small learning communities, including small instructional settings, are understood to benefit student academic learning. The Texas experience with small classes in elementary school has yielded learning gains for students in reading and math, according to research from the RAND Corporation. In particular, smaller learning environments have benefited disadvantaged and minority students. At the middle-school level, it has long been recognized that small learning communities—either small schools or small learning groups within larger schools—foster better relationships and support improved student learning.

In the past decade, research on high school bears out the same findings: smaller learning communities benefit students in terms of engagement, positive behaviors, and academic learning. Smaller learning environments positively affect grades, test scores, attendance rates, graduation rates, drug and alcohol use, and school safety. Moreover, smaller, more personalized learning structures seem to provide the setting for other high school reforms, perhaps because change is easier to implement in a smaller setting. Analysis of various high school reform efforts underscores "scaling down" as a common contributor for success. Smaller schools can more readily provide students with mentors, tutors and advisors; make learning more meaningful by linking it to life experiences and community; and provide adequate time and support for mastery of knowledge and skills.

Researchers and school designers have identified several structures for effective downsizing of secondary schools. Examples include academies, house plans, schools-within-schools, and magnet schools. Small school structures, implemented along with other complementary strategies that enhance student learning, are most likely to yield beneficial impacts.

**Academies** are sub-groups within schools, organized around particular themes. For example, career academies combine key principles of the school-to-career movement, integrating academic and vocational instruction, providing work-based learning opportunities for students, and preparing students for post-secondary education and employment - with the personalized learning environment of a small, focused learning community. Johnston High School has divided itself into three academies (Arts and Humanities, Global Enterprise and IT, and Scientific Inquiry and Design) under a Chief Academic Officer.

**House Plans** divide students in a large school into groups of several hundred, either across grade levels or by grade levels. Students take some or all courses with their house members and from their house teachers. House arrangements may be yearlong or multi-year arrangements. House plans personalize the high school experience, but usually have limited effect on curriculum or instruction. Grouping ninth-graders into a separate house is one way to ease freshman transition to high school.

**A school-within-a-school** is a small, autonomous program housed within a larger school building. Schools-within-schools are generally responsible to the district rather than to the host school's principal, and are formally authorized by the superintendent and/or board of education. Like academies, the school-within-a-school structure supports constructive relationships between and among students and teachers by grouping students together each year to take core courses with the same group of teachers, thus increasing the supports students receive from peers, teachers, and other adults. Although not a separate school, the International Baccalaureate program at Anderson High School serves special interests of students who want a well-designed college preparatory program with rigorous national examinations.

**Magnet schools and programs** use a specialty core focus (such as math, science, creative arts, or a career theme or cluster) to attract students from the entire school district. Students in a magnet program stay together for their core classes and may take other courses with non-magnet students. The Liberal Arts and Science Academy at LBJ is an example.

Specific strategies that take advantage of a smaller learning community can be implemented at the school program level, within an entire building, or district-wide. Most of these strategies have the advantage of making students feel more connected to each other, to adults, and to their school group. Strategies that are particularly effective in

making schools "feel" smaller may be implemented on their own or in conjunction with one of the structural approaches discussed above.

**Freshman transition activities** help ease the difficulties students often encounter as they move from middle to high school. Some schools place all first-year students in their own academy or house setting, sometimes in a separate wing or even a separate building, with extra supports from teachers and counselors.

**Multi-year groups**, in which several teachers stay with a group of students over a period of two or more years, foster trust and intimacy between students and teachers. This strategy is similar to "looping," a strategy used in elementary or middle schools when groups of students stay together with a teacher for more than one year. A multi-year group is a strategy for keeping several teachers with a group of students for a set period of time.

**Alternative scheduling** such as block scheduling is more easily done in smaller schools. It provides extended class periods that provide teachers with the time for in-depth lessons and experiential learning. These arrangements permit more time for tutoring and intensive projects, facilitate enrichment, and allow lagging students to catch up and advanced students to delve into topics more deeply or take more courses.

**Academic teaming** organizes groups of teachers across departments, so that teachers share the same students rather than the same subject. This strategy has much the same effect as a house structure. Teaming links teachers, who teach different subjects, in a team that shares responsibility for the curriculum, instruction, evaluation, and sometimes scheduling and discipline of a group of 100-150 students. Teams of teachers share the same planning time, and sometimes share a specific area of the school building.

### **Small Schools**

Smaller schools support academic achievement. According to research studies conducted in the past two decades, student performance in small schools is at least equal, and possibly higher, in small schools relative to larger schools. The findings on academic achievement are equally divided; approximately half the studies show that students do no worse in small schools than in larger one; while the other half finds students in small schools do better on measures such as school grades, test scores, honor roll membership, subject-area achievement, and higher-order thinking skills assessments.

Smaller schools also promote academic equity by helping to close the achievement gap between students from higher-income and students from lower-income families. The correlation between poverty and low achievement is as much as ten times stronger in larger schools than in small ones.

Smaller schools have higher attendance rates than larger schools, and attendance improves for individual students who transfer from large to smaller schools. Small high schools have a relatively greater impact on attendance of minority and low socioeconomic status students and have lower dropout rates and higher graduation rates than large schools; states with the largest school and school districts have the highest dropout rates.

Smaller high schools can prepare students for college as well or better than larger schools. Students from small high schools can do as well or better than students from larger schools on college-related variables such as entrance examination scores, acceptance rates, attendance, grade point average and completion. There are, however, many small rural high schools that have not produced above-average results. Size alone, therefore, is not the key to success.

Student attitudes and behavior are more positive in smaller schools, with minority and low socioeconomic status students most profoundly affected. Multiple studies have associated small schools with students' positive attitudes toward school, as well as the lower incidence of negative social behaviors such as truancy, classroom disruption, vandalism, aggressive behavior, theft, substance abuse and gang participation.

Of all the research on small high school impacts, the most well-documented finding is that students in small schools participate in extracurricular activities to a greater extent and in a wider variety. This is especially significant since extracurricular participation is associated with other desirable outcomes, such as positive attitudes and social behavior.

At the same time, small high schools offer far more limited choices in terms of electives and other courses of study. Because small high schools are often oriented around a particular theme or course of study, they are designed to attract students who make the trade-off between area of interest and other academic and extra-curricular options. Team sports, for instance, may be limited in small schools.

In creating small schools, school districts must weigh the costs of small scale against the benefits and may find it necessary to cut some traditional services and positions in order to remain affordable to the school district.

### **Charter Schools**

Between 1993 and 2003, the percentage of students in all grades choosing to attend a public school other than their assigned public school increased from 11 percent to 15 percent, while the percentage attending assigned public schools decreased from 80 percent to 74 percent. The percentage of students attending private schools also increased during this period. This increase, however, was smaller than the increase in the percentage of students attending a public school other than their assigned public school. Research on the effectiveness of choice options in improving student achievement is inconclusive, though some options have been shown to have positive effects on participants' achievement. Across the nation, researchers have found that many high

school choice programs are either too new to show results or their impact on student achievement has not been studied.

Charter schools are public schools that are exempt from some regulations in exchange for a commitment to improve student achievement. Usually they are open to all students and often they are developed in geographic areas where parents and educators are dissatisfied with the current district school choices. Charter schools are given the flexibility to respond to student needs in innovative ways and serve as laboratories for new approaches. To the extent charter schools compete with traditional district schools for students, they can also provide an incentive for other schools to improve.

At this time, there are several state-sponsored charter schools within the AISD geographic area serving students who live within AISD. These campuses (or schools) have secured charter status under a provision of the Texas Education Code, are approved by the Texas Education Agency, and are funded by the State of Texas. Current state-chartered schools include a wide array of school offerings: the University of Texas Charter School, serving children in PK through Grade 3 (with plans to go through Grade 5 with about 300 students); the KIPP Academy middle school, serving children in Grades 5-8; a number of early childhood/primary schools extending through grades PK-8; and several dropout recovery schools, such as American Youthworks (serving students in Grades 9-12 or age 14 and older), designed to meet the needs of students who have been unsuccessful in traditional school settings.

Because AISD is a Chapter 41 school district, the loss of students from the AISD system penalizes the district and results in AISD sending additional dollars to the state and other districts. The loss of AISD students has a financial impact of about \$4500 per student under the current state school finance system.

To date, the evidence about better academic achievement for charter school students is inconclusive. Some state level studies and multi-state studies show charter school students outperforming their peers. Other research shows similar or lower levels of achievement. Effects depend on multiple factors, including state charter laws, funding levels, integrity and experience of the school operator, and how long the school has been in operation. Texas charter schools show a wide range of performance quality, ranging from schools rated 'exemplary' year after year, to those consistently rated 'academically unacceptable' or low performing.

The majority of the 190-plus Texas charter schools serve students in secondary grades, and enrollment has grown each year. Roughly 60,000 Texas students attend charter schools. Many charter schools are established to serve high school students at risk of poor performance or students who have dropped out. Students report that a smaller environment is desirable for them, and many seek alternative scheduling choices not available in traditional high schools. Parents consistently report that they selected a charter school because of the small setting and the opportunity for their child to have strong personal relationships with teachers and staff.

Texas law provides for state charters and district charters. High Tech High School from San Diego is currently exploring the possibility of beginning in the Austin area as a state or as an AISD district charter. District charters offer school districts the opportunity to implement 'campus and program charter schools' governed by the Board of Trustees and funded directly through the foundation program, as are traditional schools. For every student attending a state charter, the district in which the student resides loses the funding for that student.

Currently, AISD does not have a district approved charter school. In 2002, AISD established a formal procedure to receive proposals from interested organizations that want to create a district charter school as part of the Austin Independent School District. The advantage of district-approved charter schools is that the students in the schools remain as AISD students. Including these students in the AISD report to the state also lessens the impact of the Chapter 41 school finance system (that is, AISD keeps about \$4500 per student that would otherwise have been sent away to the state or other districts under the Chapter 41 system. This winter the Administration will be bringing to the Board proposals that will permit AISD to accept student transfers from outside the district and to receive tuition payments for outside students in special cases.

AISD anticipates receiving several proposals to establish several schools either as specialized schools (see below) or a district charter schools. Austin Youthworks is exploring a relationship with AISD to open a middle school dropout recovery program as a district charter beginning in fall 2006. A Young Women's Leadership Academy is being proposed to serve young women in Grades 6-12, beginning in the Fall of 2007. The Asia Society of America is proposing that AISD open a school for international studies in the Fall of 2007.

### **Specialized Schools**

Specialized high schools exist within the system of public education to offer unique educational programs attractive to particular sets of students. Magnet schools currently serve this purpose. Specialized schools draw students to specialized curricula aligned with their interests. In some of these schools, principals have more autonomy over certain decisions, such as teacher selection and class scheduling, but the defining feature is not management or governance innovation but innovative curricula and instructional approaches that offer rigor and relevance within a specialty.

Austin ISD has several specialized schools. One is Garza Independence High School, a nationally recognized public high school of choice offering high-quality educational opportunities to students who have not been well served in traditional education settings. The district currently includes three academic magnets as schools within schools at LBJ High School and Kealing and Fulmore middle schools. Another specialized campus is International High School for recent immigrants.

Career institutes also serve as special programs drawing students from across the district. These include the Hospitality and Culinary Institute at Travis High School and the Neal Kocurek Health Sciences Institute at Lanier High School.

The AISD Strategic Plan also calls for the development of early childhood centers. The district is currently exploring the feasibility and educational advantages of launching pilot Pre-K centers across the district to better serve our children coming from Economically Disadvantaged families and families in which English is not the first language. The number of AISD students in pre-K classrooms has grown astronomically over the past three years.

A common thread among these schools is that they offer a rigorous specialized program geared to provide students specialized knowledge and skill. And they are organized to foster strong, positive relationships.

### **Challenges Posed by a Portfolio of High School Options**

Developing a portfolio of high school options poses a number of challenges for a large urban school district. A number of these challenges must be addressed through Board policy decisions. Others are operational issues. These challenges include:

- Administrative and operational costs for smaller school models;
- District-wide consistency and flexibility;
- Transfer policy and practice; and
- Transportation.

### **Next Steps**

The Austin Independent School District will hold a number of district and campus forums to engage students, teachers, parents, administrators and the greater Austin community in the creation of this portfolio of options for secondary education in AISD. The models chosen by a particular school will be the result of community consensus built within each school community, including the elementary and middle schools feeding each high school. The redesign plans will address the challenges facing each school. Some plans may be very dramatic, while others may be designed to address specific challenges. By June 2006, the AISD Board of Trustees will recommend a coherent, cohesive, transformative portfolio of high school options for the District. Over the next four years, all AISD high schools will implement their high school redesign plans.