

Academics 2000: First Things First Evaluation Report, 1998-99

Executive Summary Author: Holly Koehler, Ph.D.

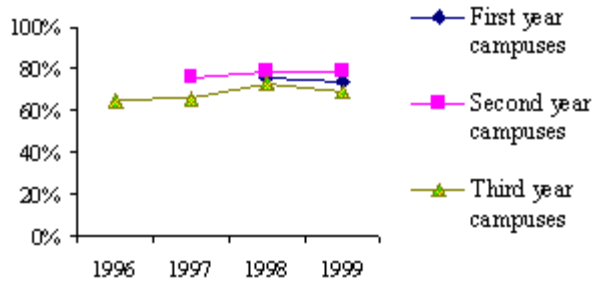
Academics 2000: First Things First is the Texas initiative under the Goals 2000: Educate America Act (Public Law 103-227). The purpose of Academics 2000 is to raise the level of academic achievement of all Texas students by ensuring that each child achieves fourth grade mastery of the foundation subjects by the end of the fourth grade. At the local level, the Academics 2000 initiative provides communities with opportunities to design educational programs to promote reading achievement among their students. Academics 2000 funding is provided for planning and implementation of initiatives to improve reading, including intensive and sustained professional development in research-based instructional strategies and methodologies. In addition, funding is provided for preservice education to provide early childhood and elementary educators with skills and knowledge to foster reading achievement among all students.

Campus and support staff from the Austin Independent School District (AISD) began applying for Academics 2000 grants for the 1996-97 school year. Some campuses applied independently, some campuses submitted joint proposals along with one or more other campuses, and some district support staff submitted proposals that included large numbers of campuses. During 1996-97, AISD received 7 Academics 2000 grants totaling \$839,209; during 1997-98, AISD received 8 Academics 2000 grants totaling \$737,447; during 1998-99, AISD received 11 Academics 2000 grants totaling \$1,239,723. Of the 1998-99 awards, three were first year grants: 1) Maplewood and Summitt, 2) Mathews, and 3) Primary Education, which included twenty-three campuses (i.e., Blackshear, Govalle, Houston, Jordan, Allison, Winn, Sims, Sanchez, Linder, Blanton, Becker, Andrews, Pecan Springs, Wooten, Hart, Reilly, Langford, St. Elmo, Galindo, Graham, Joslin, Pleasant Hill and Odom). One was a second year continuation: 1) Dawson. Seven were third year continuations: 1) Allan and Brooke; 2) Barrington, Ortega and Zavala; 3) Cook and Wooldridge; 4) Dyslexia Support, which included four campuses (i.e., Blackshear, Govalle, Jordan and Oak Springs/Rice); 5) Harris; 6) Palm and Widen and 7) Travis Heights.

At the end of the funding year, recipients of Academics 2000 grants were required to submit completed evaluation reports to the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Generally, recipients were asked to describe major program activities, overall evaluation results, future program plans and performance indicators used in evaluating the effectiveness of major activities. Copies of the 1998-99 evaluation reports submitted to the TEA by AISD grant recipients were collected and summarized and are presented in this report.

- As a result of the evaluation efforts, it was determined that the district's Academics 2000 grant programs served 42 campuses, 9,588 students 801, teachers, 16 preservice educators, 54 administrators, 32 other staff members and 7,185 parents.
- As shown in the figure below, for the three first-year Academics 2000 campuses, the percentage of students passing TAAS Reading decreased from 76% to 74% between 1998 and 1999; for the second year campus, the percentage increased from 76% to 79% between 1997 and 1999; for the seven third year campuses, the percentage increased from 65% to 73% between 1996 and 1998 and decreased from 73% to 69% between 1998 and 1999.

Percentage Passing TAAS Reading at First, Second, and Third Year Academics 2000 Campuses, 1998-99



- Consistent TAAS Reading score increases were not observed, with one exception: Dyslexia Support. TAAS Reading scores of students at Dyslexia Support campuses increased from 42% to 59% between 1996 and 1999. TAAS Reading scores are presented for each program in the individual program sections of the evaluation report.
- Grant recipients selected one or more performance indicators with which to evaluate the success of their programs. Principals and program administrators reported increases in student reading achievement on the basis of Reading Recovery Levels, Informal Reading Inventories, TAAS practice tests, Concepts About Print, Letter Identification, running records, the Developmental Reading Assessment, and the amount of time students spent reading. In addition, principals reported improved classroom instruction on the basis of principal observations, teacher scores on a locally developed teacher appraisal instrument, teacher pre- and post-tests, and teacher interviews. Information regarding specific performance indicators is presented for each program in the individual program sections of the evaluation report.
- AISD staff participated in a variety of Academics 2000-funded activities to ensure that all students read on grade level by the end of the fourth grade. Teachers used reading strategies including guided reading, paired reading, shared reading, flexible grouping and literature circles. Reading programs were implemented, including Helping One Student to Succeed, Project Read, and Reading Recovery. Other activities included implementing literacy centers, purchasing leveled readers, and establishing literacy libraries. Additional activities included TAAS camp, literacy support groups and literacy software. Parents, literacy specialists, and volunteers from the community worked with students. Parental involvement was emphasized; staff at many campuses hosted family literacy events, implemented home literacy programs and provided training for parents. Ongoing assessment, including the Primary Assessment of Language Arts and Mathematics, was emphasized.
- Every Academics 2000 program had a staff development component. Staff development activities included graduate-level courses in literacy and technology, TAAS analysis workshops and national literacy conferences. In addition, some staff participated in training in Breakthrough to Literacy, Reading Styles, Reading Recovery, Literacy Backbone, curriculum alignment, assessment and technology. Staff members were encouraged to observe in other classrooms and at other campuses. Teachers met to discuss literacy issues, received coaching and feedback from trainers and had opportunities to reflect on their practices.
- Staff from AISD Academics 2000 programs reported a number of successes and challenges associated with implementation during 1998-99. Many reported that the grant program changed the way teachers and administrators think about and approach early literacy. In addition, the development, implementation and maintenance of a coherent and integrated approach to student literacy was cited as an important accomplishment. Other major successes included the following: teachers gained knowledge and understanding regarding ongoing assessment and using results to plan instruction to meet individual student needs; literacy centers were established in many classrooms; the importance of developmentally appropriate texts led to the establishment of literacy

libraries on each campus; parent involvement increased; campuses received much-needed literacy materials.

- Staffing issues proved problematic for staff of several of the district's Academics 2000 programs. Grant administrators struggled to find qualified applicants to fill staff positions, and mentors were frequently unable to return each year. Other challenges reported included resistance to change, staff turnover, paperwork demands and budget delays.
- After Academics 2000 funding has ended, in 2000 or 2001 depending on the cycle of each grant, some program activities will continue through other funding sources (e.g., Title I, Excel, other local funds). Staff at several campuses plan to continue their collaborative partnerships with outside organizations that began as part of their Academics 2000 programs. Because the emphasis of many of the district's Academics 2000 programs has been capacity building through staff development, coaching, observation, feedback and reflection, many of the programs' activities have become self-sustaining (e.g., implementation of balanced literacy activities including literacy centers). Teachers at some campuses will continue to meet and discuss literacy issues to participate in staff development to develop capacity further.