

TRACK DATA. TWEAK INSTRUCTION. REPEAT.

A CONSTANT FOCUS ON STUDENT PROGRESS BOOSTS ACHIEVEMENT IN TEXAS DISTRICT

By Valerie von Frank

What kind of data does the Aldine (Texas) Independent School District collect on each of the 64,000 students in the system? Raymond Stubblefield just laughs.

“Really, anything you want to know about a child,” the Stephens Elementary School principal said. “We work hard at making sure we’re looking at the high leverage points that affect student learning and making sure we have multiple sources of data.”

These include traditional information: progress reports, grades, and state assessment results, including a statewide reading inventory given three times a year and state language acquisition tests. The school has a chart for each student with longitudinal data, such as whether the student has ever been retained, school history, and pre-K attendance.

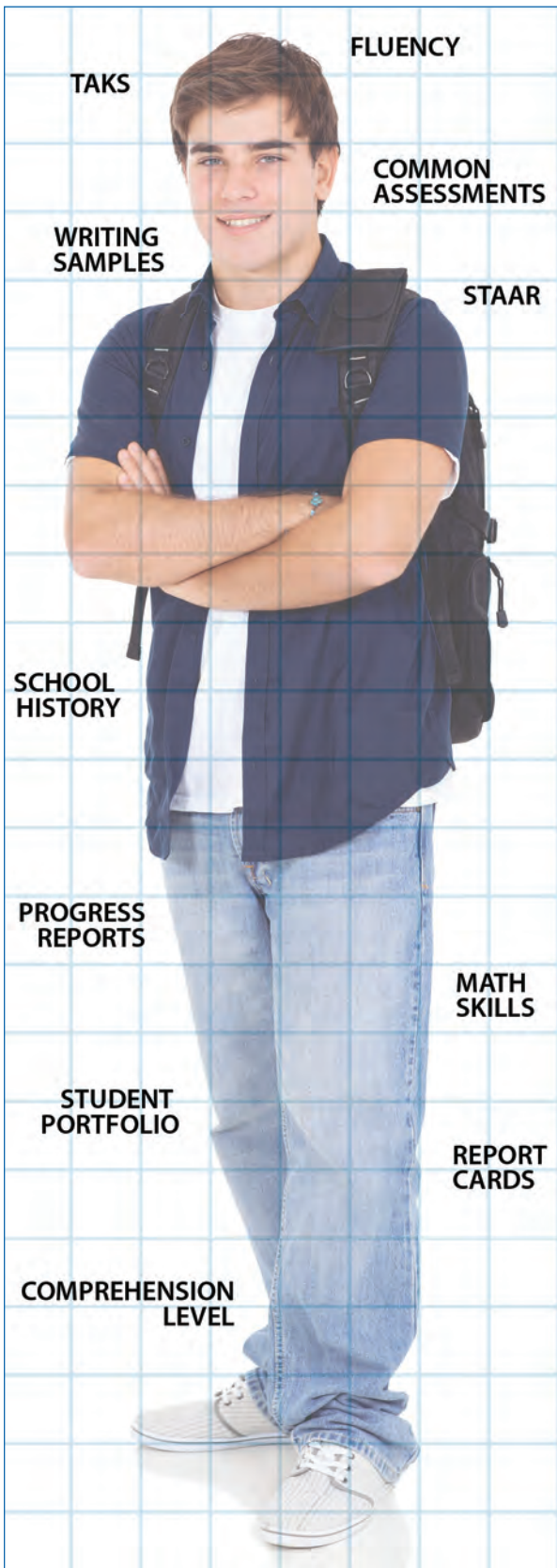
In addition, the school data sheet includes teachers’ running records of the child’s fluency, comprehension, and campus formative assessment information updated every three weeks, and districtwide common assessments from every subject benchmarked every 18 weeks. Teachers have additional progress information from student portfolios and writing folders.

In a test-barraged culture, Aldine stands out as a district that has continually adjusted how and what student data it uses. More importantly, as Priscilla Ridgway, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, points out, “We don’t just collect the data. We do actually look at it.”

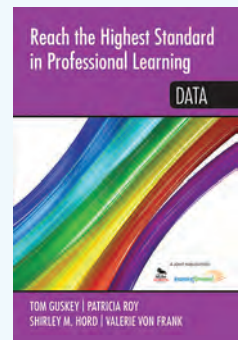
Aldine ISD uses what it sees to constantly adjust — to plan what teachers need to know to better instruct students and to offer additional support where schools are lagging.

A NEW BEGINNING

Superintendent Wanda Bamberg recalls the late 1990s, when Aldine did not have the positive reputation it now



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has. Student proficiency was low. Bamberg was then in charge of curriculum and instruction. In a meeting with the superintendent and deputy superintendent, the three reviewed what information they would need in order to use a scorecard based on the Baldrige quality framework.

“I’m looking at all this, and I remember leaning over to (then-deputy superintendent) Nadine (Kujawa) and saying, ‘This looks like a whole lot of work,’ and she said, ‘It does,’” Bamberg said. “But once we started it and started looking at goals and targets and asking questions, we realized it made a difference in what we were able to do as a district. “You realize you perform better as a system because you’re constantly looking at things that will make you say either, ‘Hey, this is good; it’s working,’ or ‘What are we going to do now? This is not going very well.’ And if you wait until the year’s over to look, it’ll all come back and bite you.”

Aldine’s proactive approach to using data has resulted in steadily improving student achievement for a decade — with a student population that is mostly poor, highly mobile, nearly all students of color, and includes a large number of English language learners. Those characteristics, though, don’t define the way the district sees “our kids,” the phrase the educators there consistently used.

“The first thing I have to say is, our students are quite capable of learning,” Ridgway said about her district.

Indeed, students’ achievement has been acknowledged repeatedly at the state and national levels. Aldine won the

Broad Prize for Urban Education in 2009, chosen from among the 100 largest urban districts in the country, for demonstrating “the greatest overall performance and improvement in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps among low-income students and students of color” according to the organization website (www.broadprize.org). The district had been a finalist for the prize three times before — in 2004, 2005, and 2008.

Broad selected the district because students exceeded the level of achievement predicted based on their socioeconomic status, and African-American and Hispanic students narrowed the performance gap with white students in reading and in math at the elementary and middle grades. The district outperformed other Texas districts with similar demographics in 2007 in both reading and math at all grade levels.

The Texas Education Agency, the state agency responsible for public education, featured the district for its “collaborative monitoring and intervention” in its Best Practices Clearinghouse, reporting that the achievement levels of the district’s at-risk, limited English proficient, and economically disadvantaged students on the state standardized exam were statistically significant compared with similar students in peer districts (Texas Education Agency, n.d.).

These recognitions are the result of a clearly articulated curriculum aligned with state standards that is continually monitored at all levels, from teacher to principal to area superintendents and central office administrators. When data show students aren’t meeting expectations, the system kicks in with

ALDINE ISD GRADES 3-11 SCORES

TEXAS ASSESSMENT OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS

Percentage proficient and above					
School year	Reading	Writing	Math	Social studies	Science
2006-07	88%	94%	78%	91%	67%
2007-08	90%	93%	81%	93%	69%
2008-09	90%	93%	83%	95%	76%
2009-10	90%	94%	86%	97%	84%
2010-11*	87%	90%	85%	96%	81%

*Texas switched its state assessment in 2011-12 to STAAR, a more challenging standardized exam that resulted in fewer students across the state reaching levels considered acceptable by the state. In 2013, 71% of all students in the Aldine district achieved at satisfactory or above on STAAR, an increase from 66% in 2012.

professional development for teachers to improve those weak areas. The data don’t drive the district’s success, but the information is the reason educators are able to continually improve, the superintendent said.

“Using data has helped us catch students (who are not succeeding) faster and earlier, and it’s helped us be able to monitor our instruction better,” Bamberg said.

CLEAR EXPECTATIONS

The change in the system began with an emphasis on curriculum, Bamberg said. District leaders formed teams of teachers to develop a common, districtwide curriculum. Teachers studied state expectations at every grade level in all content areas to create a set of grade-level expectations. They also met in vertical teams so each grade continued to build student knowledge, and the district created pacing guides so teachers would address the same skills at the same time during the year.

“We recognized that we have kids who move around, sometimes four or five times a year,” Bamberg said. “If one school was following one scope and sequence and another school was following another scope and sequence, even kids moving within our own district would have gaps in what they were learning.”

While the pacing is nonnegotiable, teachers have leeway in how they present the lesson. They all need to teach the targeted skills using district-approved materials, but how they work with the materials and how they meet the needs of their own students is up to them.

“We don’t script the teachers,” Ridgway said. “What is taught is spelled out, and we use a lot of the strategies that are best practices and research-based strategies across the district. But my chocolate cake might be a different recipe from your chocolate cake. It’ll still be a chocolate cake. We don’t take away the teacher’s creativity or tell them every word to say and how to say it. That’s why they’re teachers.”

ALIGNMENT

Once the district had curriculum guides in place for every subject K-12 and aligned with state standards, teachers had several years to work with the new expectations and develop lessons. Then they were back to work again on a new challenge — common districtwide assessments. Teams developed the assessments based on the outlined grade and subject expectations. Teachers also collaborated by subject and grade level at some schools to develop campuswide tests to augment the districtwide assessments.

ALDINE ISD STATISTICS

- Aldine Independent School District is in Harris County, Texas, just north of Houston.
- The district has **five** high schools, **five** 9th-grade schools, **10** middle schools, **11** intermediate schools, **33** elementary schools, **eight** early childhood/pre-K schools, and a pre-kindergarten campus.
- Total enrollment is about **67,500** students, with **86%** eligible for free or reduced-price meals.
- A handful of students speak one of five languages other than English, and an additional **31%** are Spanish-speaking English language learners.
- Its student population is **2%** white, **1%** Asian/Pacific Islander, **70%** Hispanic, **26%** African-American, and **1%** other.

THE VIEW FROM THREE LEVELS

WANDA BAMBERG, superintendent

"We had to ensure all kids were getting the instruction they were supposed to have as the first step. We said, 'We're all going to teach this,' and outlined strategies. After one year, people saw what a difference it made for kids, and teachers were looking at their own data that showed our kids did so much better that year than they did the prior year. When they realized our kids really could do it, they were willing to do anything. Then we moved on to creating common assessments."

RAYMOND STUBBLEFIELD, Stephens Elementary School principal

"We've always done data analysis in our teams, but now we are really being intentional about drilling down to student work and student thinking and student learning instead of just working on the planning and preparation side. As a campus, we have collective targeted areas. Any decision that we make on our campus is always based on data. It's always based on student needs that we identify through data analysis."

BRENNA DORGAN, 4th-grade language arts teacher

"Third- and 4th-grade language arts teachers plan together, and within that team is where we do most of our data analysis. We keep one spreadsheet for each student where we're trying to see the kid's progress, benchmarks, report card grades, progress reports, comprehension levels, fluency. We're trying to make sure it all aligns and that we're being responsive to the students' needs when we're planning together, when we're planning in our own classrooms, and in the conversations that we're holding with students. It's all based on evidence and data. We're being proactive as well as reactive in our analysis."

Early on, Bamberg said, testing was more frequent and depended on how students performed. When the district found a weak area, for example, students would be monitored every few weeks to determine whether teachers were keeping on top of the planned curriculum.

"Until you get your curriculum out there and everybody is following it, assessments are no good," Bamberg said. "We have to ensure that every child is getting access to what's supposed to be taught at that grade level. Then we have to be sure it's assessed appropriately."

"When we first started giving the districtwide tests, the teachers would complain and say, 'That's a bad item,'" she continued. "From time to time, we did have a bad item, and we'd throw it out. But what more often happened is we discovered the teacher wasn't teaching that concept to the level of difficulty we were testing it on. We were following the state expectations for that concept, so it was truly a matter of our instruction not being aligned with what was written in the curriculum and what we were testing. That has helped us focus on improving instruction, and we use the data to improve instruction."

"It also helped us use the data to keep up with students and not wait until they got an F on their report cards to intervene and give them some assistance."

TRACKING DATA

To keep track of all the data, the district purchased *eduphoria!*, an online application that can be used to track teacher appraisals, professional development, facilities usage, lesson planning, and student achievement data. A second system tracks additional student information, such as discipline and attendance.

Through *eduphoria!*, educators have nearly instant access to student assessment results and can have the data disaggregated and results color-coded. The idea is that a teacher can give a class a test, walk the answer sheets down to a scanner, and by

the time the teacher returns to the classroom, have the assessment results waiting online.

The teacher then knows how many students missed any one question; how students performed by gender, socioeconomic status, race, and ethnicity; and can have results broken down by students receiving program services such as English language learner or special education. The information allows the teacher to immediately address concerns and reteach content to students who need reinforcement.

"We wanted that teacher to be able to look at that data and be able to make changes in classroom instruction the very next day," Bamberg said.

In addition to classroom teachers reviewing the data, principals are responsible for monitoring student progress in order to support teachers and students. Principals in each feeder system within the district meet every six weeks with an area superintendent to review the data from their schools. They look at grade-level and subject results.

The district's curriculum directors monitor the data and pass reports to the superintendent's cabinet, comprising assistant superintendents and area superintendents. Bamberg looks at districtwide results two to four times a year in meetings with the area superintendents. She also checks informally in visits to schools.

"A really good principal is able to tell me which group is struggling and what they are doing to address that issue," Bamberg said. "They know who's struggling because they're looking at their data weekly or biweekly, whereas I'm not looking at that until it's been a grading period or a benchmark assessment. The most important pieces of the data are going to reside on our scorecard, and that's taken to the board, and then pieces of the scorecard wind up on my evaluation."

The superintendent also meets with principals in the summer to review their results. She asks the principals of schools

with standout scores in an area, such as middle school math or high school biology, to present to the group information about how they achieved that result.

“A lot of times,” Bamberg said, “it’s a matter of letting the schools know that this is important and we’re looking at this data — that keeps it on their radar. One of the things that central office does is to support and remind people, and we always make sure the system’s in place so a school can look at the data easily.”

SUPPORT FOR STUDENT LEARNING

Bamberg said district leaders needed to change the culture so everyone understood the raised expectations and also needed to align teachers’ professional learning with student improvement goals.

“One of the things we had to work through the culture to do was to create the expectation that there is going to be a common planning meeting, and it’s a data meeting,” Bamberg said. “Teachers had to get used to the idea that, ‘We’re going to come with our results, you’re each going to have your results, and we’re going to talk about what the kids did well on and what they did poorly on.’”

Teachers identify areas of student need, and then they work to develop the skills they need to address those specific areas. District support includes staff at all levels working continuously on learning ways to improve instruction.

“Using data has changed professional learning in that we try to tie learning back to a specific issue,” Bamberg said. “I remember when we would go through a needs assessment where teachers would give us all these topics they wanted to learn about. We don’t do that anymore. We use the data to determine what the topics are. A teacher might say, ‘I want some more professional development on manipulatives,’ but we’re going to use the data to tie our professional development more specifically to the concepts and the overall strategies that are good for math.”

Several systemwide strategies for professional learning are in place.

Common planning time. District leaders encourage principals to schedule time for teacher collaboration during the day. Teachers also frequently meet on their own time after school. Secondary schools generally are able to schedule common meeting time, as do some elementary schools. As teachers review their data and plan lessons together, they share strategies.

Districtwide learning. District staff review state assessment data each summer to make curricular and professional development decisions. The district focuses on common goals, such as developing professional learning communities or a writing strategy, and provides districtwide professional learning. Educators are required to engage in 40 hours a year of formal professional development.

Educators have options to complete some district learning

opportunities online. They can take a course and print a certificate at completion. The district also can evaluate the online professional development through tests of the content at the end of the course in addition to a brief survey of the attendee’s response to the course effectiveness.

An intranet database allows teachers to access model lessons colleagues have created and the district’s curriculum directors have screened for quality. “We need to make sure people understand what that standard said, what it looks like when you teach it, what products could look like,” said Sara Ptomey, executive director of curriculum and instruction.

Curriculum directors and skill specialists. The district restructured central office staff to create program director positions, three each for math and English, specializing in pre-K-4, 5-8, and 9-12. Two directors each cover science and social studies, divided pre-K-6 and 7-12. Curriculum directors also are in place for visual arts, performing arts, dyslexia, and library media services. Program directors are responsible for the curriculum and instructional materials. They review the benchmark assessments and provide professional development.

“In many districts, you’ll find a professional development department, an assessment department, and a curriculum department,” Ptomey said. “But they don’t talk to each other. Our district thinks that’s ridiculous,” and so created the curriculum director positions.

Curriculum directors offer professional development during the workday, evenings, and over the summer. They offer sessions at a principal’s request; coach in the school, such as demonstrating guided reading to teachers; or facilitate a teacher team during teachers’ common planning period. They visit classrooms to observe teachers and provide guidance and feedback.

A primary focus, however, is to coach schools’ assistant principals for curriculum, the principals, and school skill specialists. Every campus has at least one skill specialist, and most have a specialist in language arts and one in math. Many campuses allocate Title I money to additional support to have a specialist who may focus on certain grades, such as just primary, pre-K-2, and have another for 3rd and 4th grades. Decisions are made at the school level.

Each nine weeks, curriculum directors meet for three hours with skill specialists in their content area for professional learning specific to what students will learn in the coming nine weeks.

To get everybody speaking the same language, Ptomey said the curriculum directors then meet for 45 minutes with assistant principals from the campuses in each content area, and with principals for a total of an hour, each director providing a 15-minute overview of what instruction should look like in the coming grading period.

District balanced literacy trainers and balanced numeracy trainers also provide school specialists with monthly professional development in those areas. The goal is that, with lead-

ership support, the specialists offer professional development to teachers at their sites. Grade-level or department chairs or a school skill specialist lead teacher data meetings and help teachers focus on strands that may need to be retaught.

Each curriculum director also is responsible for five “accelerated” campuses, schools that are showing signs of falling behind academically. The directors spend time weekly on each campus to provide additional instructional support in identified areas of need.

“We do a lot of training of trainers because we’re so large (that) it’s difficult to pull teachers out during the day,” Ridgway said. “We depend a lot on campus leaders to learn and go back and provide support.”

Learning for school leaders. School leaders meet with the curriculum directors additionally, in quarterly data meetings that also include area superintendents. They review common assessment data and decide next steps for curriculum and instruction. When these teams identify broader, districtwide strategies, Aldine makes sure that principals and assistant principals are trained first so they know what to look for to evaluate how teachers are implementing what they are learning, because the administrators “are the ones who are going to be walking in and out of the classrooms every day,” Bamberg said. “You don’t want your teachers to have more knowledge about an initiative than the people who are going to monitor their instruction.”

LONG-TERM COMMITMENT

Using data is a long-term commitment, Bamberg said.

Bamberg said district leaders again are evaluating their student evaluations, looking at every grade level and subject to identify which might need additional assessment. In addition, she said the district is moving to project-based student assessments that

are more seamless within the course of teachers’ instruction rather than the paper-and-pencil, multiple-choice versions.

“We’re trying to do a mix of things that will help kids do a better job with the rigor and the writing,” Bamberg said. “We had to look at what every kid is having to do, so we’re trying to stagger a lot of the exams. Our testing schedule has gotten a lot of revision over the years.”

Ptomey said the district has reviewed its needs and is working to continue to improve some fundamentals — the graduation rate and reading. The state instituted a new standardized exam with more rigor, and the district’s achievement scores dipped.

“We know we really need additional support for teachers on teaching reading,” Ptomey said. “Our scores mean 30% of our kids can’t read at grade level. That’s not good. Although there are people who would be very happy with that (given the student population), that’s inexcusable. It’s a horrible sense of urgency to make sure every kid can read at grade level.”

This focus on monitoring each student’s progress and constantly tweaking instruction is what keeps Aldine moving forward.

“It’s just a part of our culture,” Ridgway said. “It’s what we do.”

REFERENCE

Texas Education Agency. (n.d.). *Collaborative monitoring and intervention model — Aldine ISD.* Available at www.tea.state.tx.us/Best_Practice_Summaries/Collaborative_Monitoring_and_Intervention_Model--Aldine_ISD.aspx.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

The article, “Track data. Tweak instruction. Repeat,” on pp. 44-50 illustrates how the Aldine (Texas) Independent School District uses data to improve teacher practices and raise student achievement. Use these questions to reflect on how your district uses data.

1. How do educators in the Aldine district use the data they collect to affect teacher learning in ways that will improve student learning? How does your district use the data it collects?
2. What does the case study demonstrate about how data can be used in professional learning at the school level? At the system level?
3. What is the district’s role in collecting data? What do you see in the case that is noteworthy about the district’s role? What drawbacks are evident in the district’s data collection? What does your system do at the district level to use data?
4. Who should decide how much and what types of data to collect? How did Aldine make those choices? Who currently makes those determinations in your system?
5. What additional sources of data would help teachers, school leaders, and district administrators in your system make decisions about professional learning?
6. What evidence does Aldine use for how effective professional learning is for teachers? What evidence does your district have for the impact of professional learning?