



# Austin Independent School District

## Department of Program Evaluation

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### PROJECT ADVANCE SUMMARY REPORT, 2006-2007

#### PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Austin Independent School District (AISD) focuses on providing successful college and career preparation for all students. To reach this goal, students are expected to explore careers related to their personal interests and talents, to get an early start toward college by participating in rigorous coursework, and to demonstrate the skills and knowledge needed to enroll in postsecondary education and enter a successful career.

In its fifth year of operation, AISD's Project ADVANCE (Assess, Decide, Visit, Apply Now for your College Education) received almost \$750,000 from the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation (MSDF) to support college and career preparation efforts in all 12 district high schools. During the 2006-2007 school year, the Project ADVANCE staff at each campus worked with high school students and their parents to prepare for postsecondary enrollment. Specifically, Project ADVANCE staff:

- provided opportunities for students to visit college and university campuses and speak with admissions counselors, current college students, and professors;
- supplied in-depth postsecondary preparation, financial aid, and scholarship information to high school students, parents, and teachers;
- assisted students with completing applications for college admissions testing, postsecondary admissions and enrollment, the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA), and scholarships; and
- provided students with individualized advisement related to postsecondary enrollment.

As services were provided, Project ADVANCE staff tailored college preparation information to fit the needs of each student. Students who were identified as being the first generation in their families to attend college, as having an economic disadvantage, or as having limited English proficiency were targeted for services related to negotiating the college, financial aid, and scholarship application processes.

In 2006-2007, Project ADVANCE began operating in a period of transition. The 2007-2008 school year will be the last year of ADVANCE program funding supplied by the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation (MSDF). In this final year, program activities will continue as in years past and sustainability planning will be emphasized at each school and across the district. Thus, the purpose of this summary report is to provide information related to program and student outcomes during the 2006-2007 school year for making decisions about program sustainability.

## **METHODOLOGY**

### **Evaluation Objectives**

This program summary report is intended to provide information about program implementation outcomes. Stakeholders may use the report to measure progress toward meeting articulated goals and to support ongoing decision making for program improvement and sustainability.

Primary program success indicators were identified for program evaluation purposes in 2006-2007. They are as follows:

- Student and/or parent participation in college preparation events;
- Student and/or parent participation in financial aid events;
- Student participation in college admissions tests (SAT and/or ACT);
- Completed applications to all types of postsecondary institutions (2-year, 4-year, technical and trade schools);
- Student enrollment in postsecondary institutions; and
- Selected student responses on the district High School Exit Survey.

The following sections of the report will describe program outcomes for the 2006-2007 school year. The information is intended to provide program stakeholders with information about program implementation outcomes, to measure progress toward meeting articulated goals, and to support ongoing decision making for program improvement.

### **Data Collection**

Staff in AISD's Department of Program Evaluation collected qualitative and quantitative data pertaining to clearly defined performance measures to assess the program's

progress toward its goals. District information systems provided student enrollment and demographic data, SAT and ACT test results, and information about transcripts sent. A program-specific database, the College Readiness Initiative System (CRIS), was used to collect information regarding project service offerings, and student and parent program participation. AISD's high school exit survey provided information related to students' college preparation needs, expectations about postsecondary education, and perceived educational outcomes. Project implementation requirements, quarterly report summaries, budget records, and meeting notes provided additional information pertaining to overall implementation status.

### **Data Analyses**

Mixed methods were used to describe project implementation processes and to identify associated successes and challenges. Simple descriptive statistics were used to represent the characteristics of the 2007 graduates, to describe student and parent program participation, and to summarize outcomes from the tests and surveys. Content analysis techniques were used to identify important details and themes emerging from the qualitative data sources.

## **RESULTS**

### **Program Participation**

Throughout the 2006-2007 school year, Project ADVANCE staff hosted a total of 540 college preparation and financial aid events designed to increase student and parent knowledge of postsecondary preparation, financial aid, and scholarship application processes. These events included workshops, seminars, college campus visits, college fairs,

and recruiter visits. Additionally, ADVANCE staff conducted 627 classroom visits to communicate information related to preparing for college and applying for financial aid. At the campus level, the number of events held at a single school was variable and ranged between 21 and 88 opportunities for student and/or parent participation.

The numbers of participants also varied across campuses. Overall, 7,246 students participated in at least one college preparation and/or financial aid event. At the campus level, student participation was variable and ranged between 191 and 1,419 students participating in at least one event during the school year. Most program participants were classified as juniors and seniors; however, some programs were open to all those wanted to participate. Of these participants, 3% were Asian/ Pacific Islander, 14.6% were African American, 49.5% were Hispanic, and 32.5% were White. Almost 43% of the students participating were categorized as being economically disadvantaged and almost 8% were categorized as limited English proficient (LEP).

Project ADVANCE sought to engage all students in college preparation events during their junior and senior years of high school. To assess the degree to which services were provided for students, outcomes for high school graduates were examined. This examination of the program participation for students in the graduating Class of 2007 revealed that almost 97% of graduates had participated in at least one or more events hosted by Project ADVANCE while they were in high school.

In 2006-2007, many of the college preparation and financial events were targeted

for parents. Overall, 836 parents and/or guardians attended one or more events. The numbers of parents participating in events were low compared to the overall student enrollment and participation. Additionally, parent and/or guardian participation rates varied across schools. One school had 185 parents participate, while another school had less than 5 parents attend an event.

Each year, on the district's annual High School Exit Survey, many students report the lack of financial resources as a primary reason for not pursuing postsecondary enrollment. During the 2006-2007 school year, Project ADVANCE staff hosted 153 financial aid events designed to increase student and parent knowledge of financial aid and scholarship application processes. The number of events greatly increased during the 2006-2007 school year, as there were 49 financial aid events documented in the 2005-2006 school year. Overall, 4,192 students and/or parents participated in financial aid events. Again, the number of participants varied across high schools, ranging from totals of 48 to 727 students and/or parents attending at least one financial aid event.

Financial aid events were typically designed to address the needs of the high school senior who is preparing for college enrollment. However, students may participate in events throughout high school. An examination of the program participation for the graduating Class of 2007 revealed that 66% of the graduates had participated in one or more financial aid event while they were in high school. Thirty percent of the graduates who attended financial aid events were categorized as economically disadvantaged.

## **ACT and SAT Tests**

In addition to the school counselors, Project ADVANCE staff often provided students with information related to SAT and ACT tests and assisted them in registering for those tests. In the 2006-2007 school year, fewer students took the SAT test with 2,379 AISD students completing the SAT exam, compared with the 2,476 students taking the test the year before. According to the College Board's Profile Report (2007) for the SAT, the AISD average Verbal score was 509, comparable with the national average score of a 503 and above the state average of 492. The average Math score for AISD was a 525, compared with a national average of 515 and a state average of 507. In Writing, AISD students had an average score of 491, while the state average score was 482 and the national average score was 494. The combined score average of AISD students was 1525, above both the national average of 1511 and the state average of 1481.

In 2006-2007, fewer students took the ACT test with 908 students completing the ACT exam compared with the 1,100 students in 2005-2006. The ACT High School Profile Report (2007) indicated that the average composite score in AISD was between the state and national averages at 20.9 compared to the state average of 20.5, and the national average of 21.2.

An examination of SAT and ACT scores across student groups revealed differences in performance across student groups (AISD student test records, 2006-2007). Students who were White were more likely than their Hispanic or African American peers to

perform above the AISD mean on the SAT across all sections of the tests. Students who were categorized as economically disadvantaged or LEP were more likely to score below the district average. While Project ADVANCE is not charged with the responsibility of providing academic preparation, these differences should be considered as project staff provide college preparation services to students. More information about SAT and ACT scores can be found at

<http://www.austinisd.org/newsmedia/releases>.

## **Postsecondary Applications and Enrollment**

Project ADVANCE staff assisted students with completing applications for admissions to postsecondary institutions that included 2-year, 4-year, technical and/or trade schools (Table 1). Looking across high schools, between 88.9% and 98.2% of their graduates completed at least one application for admission to a postsecondary institution. When disaggregated by student groups, 3.2% were Asian/ Pacific Islander, 13.5% were African American, 42.7% were Hispanic, and 40.2% were White. About 34% of the students completing applications were categorized as being economically disadvantaged and 5.3% were categorized as LEP. With exception of one school, more than 75% of the graduates across the high schools completed an application to a 2-year institution. However, the percentages of students who completed an application to 4-year institutions varied across high schools, ranging from 14% to 63%.

Table 1: Number and Percentage of 12<sup>th</sup> Grade Students Who Completed At Least One Postsecondary Application by Institution Type, Ethnicity, and Economic Status, 2006-2007

Type of Post-secondary Institution	12 <sup>th</sup> Graders Completing Application: Any Type															
	All Students		Native American		Asian/Pac. Islander		African American		Hispanic		White		Econ. Disadv.		LEP	
	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%	#	%
<b>Any-Type</b>	3422	88.8	14	0.4	111	3.2	462	13.5	1460	42.7	1375	40.2	1162	34.0	180	5.3
<b>2-Year</b>	2963	76.9	7	0.2	84	2.8	428	14.4	1369	46.2	1075	36.3	1125	38.0	177	6.0
<b>4-Year</b>	2001	51.9	10	0.5	88	4.4	284	14.2	668	33.4	951	47.5	542	27.1	55	2.7

Source: District enrollment records (ASTU) and ADVANCE program data (CRIS) prepared by the Department of Program Evaluation on October 17, 2007. *Notes: Participation counts are unique and only include students who had an "active" enrollment status at the end of the 2006-2007 school year. LBJ students include those enrolled in the comprehensive high school who were targeted for ADVANCE services. LBJ magnet students were not included.*

Because information pertaining to actual postsecondary enrollment for 2007 AISD graduates was not available at the time of this report, student intent to enroll was measured by the 2007 AISD *High School Exit Survey*. In spring 2007, 89% of 12th graders planned to enroll in a postsecondary institution after high school, up from 84.0% in 2006 and 74.6% in 2005. Of the students who were not planning to continue their education right away, 62.0% indicated that they intended to pursue it at a later time. Financial concerns were cited as the primary reason for 65% of those not planning to attend college in the next year.

Actual postsecondary enrollment of AISD graduates has increased, rising from 55% in 2002 to 62.6% in 2006 (Coneway, Schmitt, & Alderete, 2007). Enrollment in four-year colleges increased from 32.2% in 2002 to 38% in 2006. Enrollment in Austin Community College (ACC), increased from 20.3% in 2002 to 23.3% in 2006. The increase in the number of students enrolling in ACC may be attributed to the time Project ADVANCE staff spent assisting with the collaborative initiative, College Connection, designed to assist AISD students in becoming

enrolled in the local community college upon high school graduation. Additionally, ACC, with 898 enrollees, had more students enrolled from the Class of 2006 than any other college. Approximately 58% of college enrollees remained in the Austin/San Marcos area and attended either ACC, the University of Texas at Austin, Texas State University, or St. Edward's University.

### Support for College Preparation and Enrollment

The *High School Exit Survey* (2007) also provided information about the students' perspectives related to college preparation and support. Across all high schools, students reported high levels of satisfaction with Project ADVANCE program services and with their ADVANCE facilitator. Students (44%) found ADVANCE staff particularly helpful with their college searches and the admissions process.

Students often reported their parents as having had a role in their college preparation. Fifty-six percent of students identified their parents as a major source for help in preparing for college. Seventy-seven percent of students indicated that their parents supported their

post-graduation plans “a great deal.” However, the students indicated that their parents only occasionally attended school activities or meetings.

The survey asked students to comment on financial aid issues. Forty-six percent of students reported that they and their parents found the financial aid application process to be “easy/very easy” and only 13% found the process to be “difficult/very difficult.” Seniors who were not planning to enroll within a year of completing high school identified affordability (25.9%) and need for income (38.9%) as concerns influencing their enrollment decisions.

## **DISCUSSION**

Across the district, Project ADVANCE staff provided a substantial number of college preparation and financial opportunities for many students and their parents. The majority of the 2007 graduates attended at least one college preparation and/or financial aid event during their high school years. Almost 89% of students completed an application to some type of postsecondary institution. Considering these factors, it might not be surprising that there is an increasing college enrollment trend for the district.

Parent involvement is an important factor in college preparation. More than half of the students completing the high school exit survey identified their parents as being a major source of help in their college preparation. However, program participation records and student self-report revealed that parent participation levels were low. To ensure that students and their parents are getting the most accurate college preparation information and assistance, parent outreach

practices should be examined and ways to increase parent outreach should be developed.

The results related to the financial aid application process were mixed. Sixty-six percent of the graduates had participated in one or more financial aid event while they were in high school. However, less than half of them were categorized as having economic disadvantage. Results from the *High School Exit Survey* indicated that some students were well prepared to apply for financial aid, while others were still experiencing difficulty with the process. Financial concerns appear to be a real influence on postsecondary enrollment decisions.

Outside of the college preparation provided by Project ADVANCE, academic preparation also may have influenced students’ decisions to attend or not attend postsecondary institutions. Almost 20% of the survey respondents reported that low grades or test scores played a role in their choices. These academic preparation issues were reflected in the differences in average SAT and ACT scores found between student groups.

Although overall program results were positive, they only provided a basic description of selected postsecondary preparation and enrollment outcomes. Caution should be used when interpreting the results. Levels of student participation, parental involvement, and between-school differences were not examined. Further, there were other programs and school staff that offered college and career preparation services in the high schools; thus, student outcomes may not be attributable to any single program.

To date, it has been unclear how Project ADVANCE staff have worked with other

college preparation initiatives as their high schools engage in systemic change processes. The coordination of services and collaboration with other programs or initiatives would enable school and program staff to efficiently extend their outreach to all high school students and their parents, possibly increasing the likelihood that students become well prepared for postsecondary enrollment.

### **CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

Although conclusive results about program effectiveness were not determined, Project ADVANCE did provide extensive college preparation opportunities in 2006-2007, and many students and their parents were able to participate. However, the evaluation results also bring about specific concerns to be addressed. These results and concerns were not unique in the 2006-2007 school year, as similar findings and recommendations were reported previously. Again, the following recommendations are provided for continuing consideration.

- *Provide consistent opportunities for student and parent participation across all campuses.* Schools offered varying numbers of opportunities for student and parent participation across campuses. For example, one campus conducted one college visit while another campus provided nine opportunities for students to visit a college during a single school year. One campus provided five financial aid events while another conducted 22 financial aid events. It is recommended that a minimum standard be set and all campuses provide comparable opportunities for participation.
- *Identify barriers to student and parent participation in college preparation*

*services.* Student and parent utilization of Project ADVANCE services may have been influenced by factors such as the number of opportunities offered on the campus, information availability, academic course expectations, extracurricular activity conflicts, parent and/or teacher permission, student perceptions, funding, and campus administrative support. It is recommended that barriers to participation be explored and strategies be developed to reduce these barriers.

- *Increase ACT and SAT test participation for all students.* College admissions test participation in 2006-2007 decreased in comparison to the previous year. Project ADVANCE staff should explore barriers to test participation and develop strategies to reduce these barriers for all students. Staff can increase communication with students and parents about the tests, directly assist students with the registration process, help students find transportation to testing sites, and help students obtain fee waivers to cover test administration costs.
- *Provide ongoing, comprehensive financial aid information and intensive support for students applying for federal financial aid and/or scholarships.* Financial aid application processes can be complex and/or intimidating to students and their families. Because financial aid concerns influence student postsecondary enrollment decisions, intensive student support is warranted, especially for students identified as potentially being the first generation in their families to go to

college or as being economically disadvantaged.

- *Explore and adopt best practices related to providing parent outreach services.* Greater parental involvement and support may improve the chances that students become enrolled in postsecondary institutions. Project ADVANCE staff should explore the challenges to parental participation in program services and develop strategies to address them.
- *Coordinate college preparation services across programs and initiatives operating within the school and throughout the district.* Program staff and school administrators should be thoughtful about using resources effectively, as similar

college preparation services are supported by multiple funding sources and personnel within a single school and/or across the district. The bringing together of services across programs and school staff may provide better outreach to all students, consequently increasing the likelihood that they are well prepared for postsecondary enrollment, while at the same time reducing unproductive duplication of effort. Coordinated and collaborative work also may increase the chances that program services can be sustained after grant funding ends.

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