



Austin Independent School District

Department of Program Evaluation

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PROJECT ADVANCE SUMMARY REPORT, 2007-2008

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 colleges and careers related to their personal interests and talents, to get an early start toward college by participating in rigorous coursework, and to demonstrate the knowledge and skills needed to enroll in a postsecondary institution and to have a successful career.

In the 2007-2008 school year, the program's sixth year of operation, AISD's Project ADVANCE (Assess, Decide, Visit, Apply Now for your College Education) received \$1,065,000.00 from the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation (MSDF) to support college and career preparation efforts in all 12 district high schools. The 2007-2008 school year was the last year of ADVANCE program funding supplied by MSDF. In 2008-2009, State High School Allotment funding, established by the Texas legislature, will fund Project ADVANCE. The state program provides funds for college readiness activities for each district in Texas as a part of the Closing the Gaps Initiative. Local funds also will be used to cover administrative and support costs prohibited by state guidelines in 2008-2009.

During the 2007-2008 school year, the Project ADVANCE staff at each campus continued to work with high school students and their parents to prepare for postsecondary enrollment.

Specifically, Project ADVANCE staff

- provided opportunities for students to visit a variety of postsecondary institutions and to speak with admissions counselors, current college students, and professors;
- supplied in-depth postsecondary preparation, financial aid, and scholarship information to high school students and their parents;
- 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 (LEP) were targeted for services related to negotiating the college, financial aid, and scholarship application processes

METHODS

Evaluation Objectives

This program summary report is intended to provide information about program implementation outcomes. Stakeholders can 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 2007–2008. The indicators were 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)
- Selected student responses on the district High School Exit Survey
- Student enrollment in postsecondary institutions

The following sections of the report describe program outcomes for the 2007–2008 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. CRIS provided information for all district high schools, with the exception of Crockett, where no program participation data were entered into the database for the 2007–2008 school year and student and parent participation could not be determined. 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, and budget records 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. Year-to-year comparisons were adjusted to account for missing program participation data from Crockett.

RESULTS

Program Participation

Throughout the 2007–2008 school year, Project ADVANCE staff hosted a total of 949

college preparation and financial aid activities designed to increase student and parent knowledge about postsecondary preparation, financial aid, and scholarship application processes. These events included 108 classroom visits, 322 college preparation events, 93 college campus visits, 136 financial aid events, 19 college fairs, and 408 recruiter visits. A review of college preparation and financial aid event data revealed variation in the number of events provided on individual campuses throughout the school year. At the campus level, the number of events held at a single school was variable and ranged between 17 and 145 opportunities for student and/or parent participation.

Overall, 6,686 students participated in at least one college preparation and/or financial aid event in 2007–2008, compared with 7,246 students who did so the previous year. Most program participants were classified as juniors and seniors; however, some programs were open to all those wanted to participate. Of the participants, 2.2% were Asian/ Pacific Islander, 14.6% were African American, 51.9% were Hispanic, and 31.0% were White. Compared with the previous year, a higher percentage of Hispanic and a lower percentage of White students participated in 2007–2008 (Alderete-Looby, 2008). The percentage of students categorized as being economically disadvantaged increased from 43% in 2006–2007 to 49% in 2007–2008. The percentage of students categorized as LEP increased from 8% to 10.3%.

At the campus level, student participation was variable and ranged between 250 and 1,410 students participating in at least one event during the school year. The variation in the number of student participants at each

campus was not found to be related to the size of the school, as some of the smaller high schools had much higher numbers of students participating, compared with their larger counterparts. However, the overall composition of program participants was found to be representative of the schools' ethnic, economically disadvantaged, and LEP populations. About half of the schools met or exceeded their targets for overall student participation. Inconsistency in target setting affected the determination of whether the campus staff or program really met expectations.

Project ADVANCE staff 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 actively enrolled 12th-grade students in May 2008 were examined. These students may have participated in program activities across school years in one or more schools of enrollment. This examination of the program participation for students in the graduating Class of 2008 revealed that 85.4% of the actively enrolled 12th graders had participated in at least one or more events hosted by Project ADVANCE while they were in high school. This was a substantial decrease from the previous school year, when 97.0% of the actively enrolled 12th-grade students had been served.

In 2007–2008, many of the college preparation and financial events continued to be targeted at parents. Overall, 1,457 parents and/or guardians attended one or more events, an increase from the 836 who participated in 2006–2007. The numbers of parents participating in events continued to be low

compared with overall numbers for student enrollment and participation. Additionally, parent and/or guardian participation rates varied across schools. One school had 454 parents participate, while another school had 13 parents attend an event during the school year. Of the actively enrolled 12th-grade students, 18.5% had a parent and/or guardian participate in 2007–2008.

Each year, on the district’s annual High School Exit Survey (Malerba & Ware, 2008), many students report the lack of financial resources as their primary reason for not pursuing postsecondary enrollment. During the 2007–2008 school year, Project ADVANCE staff hosted 136 financial aid events designed to increase student and parent knowledge about financial aid and scholarship application processes. The number of financial aid events was considered similar to the previous year, because 153 financial aid events were documented in the 2006–2007 school year. Overall, 2,005 junior and senior students and/or parents participated in financial aid events. Again, the number of participants varied across high schools, ranging from zero to 566 students and/or parents attending at least one financial aid event.

Financial aid events typically were designed to address the needs of the high school senior who was preparing for college enrollment. An examination of the program participation for the actively enrolled 12th-grade students in May 2008 revealed 36.6% of all 12th graders and/or their parents participated in one or more financial aid event while the student was in high school. Of the financial aid program participants, 51.0% were categorized as economically

disadvantaged. Compared with the overall senior enrollment, 18.7% of the actively enrolled seniors and/or their parents/guardians who participated in financial aid events were categorized as economically disadvantaged.

In addition to the implementation of organized events and activities, the Project ADVANCE staff often met with students individually. Because the program is designed to primarily meet the needs of 12th graders, Project ADVANCE staff met with them most often. However, they also met with students in other grade levels to assist them with college and career preparation concerns. Overall, they met a total of 3,882 students one or more times during the school year. Program facilitators met with 65% of the seniors across all high schools. At 8 campuses, they met with at least 75% of the 12th graders at least once during the school year.

ACT and SAT Tests

In addition to the efforts of school counselors, Project ADVANCE staff provided students with information related to SAT and ACT tests and assisted them in registering for those tests. As a result, 74.2% of seniors reported they completed a college admissions test when they were in high school.

During the 2007–2008 school year, 2,808 junior/senior students took the SAT test. This was an increase in the number of SAT test takers, because 2,379 junior/senior students took the test the year before. The combined score average of AISD students was 1510, below the combined score average of 1525 for AISD students in the past school year. Average SAT composite scores varied significantly across high schools, ranging from 1141 to 1680. Seven high schools had average SAT scores well below the district average.

In 2007–2008, fewer students took the ACT test: 858 students completed the exam, compared with the 908 students the previous year. The ACT average composite score in AISD was 20.7, similar to the average score for the previous year. Again, average ACT scores varied significantly across high schools, ranging from 15.1 to 24.6. Seven schools had average ACT scores well below the district average.

Postsecondary Applications and Enrollment

Project ADVANCE staff assisted students with completing applications for admissions to postsecondary institutions, including 2-year, 4-year, technical, and trade schools. Looking across high schools, 3,054 (76%) high school seniors who were actively enrolled at the end of the school year completed at least one application for admission to a postsecondary institution. When disaggregated by student groups, 2.0% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 14.2% were African American, 44.6% were Hispanic, and 38.5% were White. About 35.0% of the students completing applications were categorized as being economically disadvantaged.

Because information pertaining to actual postsecondary enrollment for 2008 AISD graduates was not available at the time of this report writing, student intent to enroll was measured by the 2008 AISD High School Exit Survey. In Spring 2008, 92.2% of 12th graders planned to enroll in a postsecondary institution after high school, up from 89.0% in 2007 and 84.0% in 2006. Of the students who were not planning to continue their education right away, fewer 2008 seniors (59.2%), compared with 2007 seniors (62.0%), indicated they intended to pursue it at a later time. Financial concerns were cited by 44.7% as the primary

reason not planning to attend college in the next year.

Actual postsecondary enrollment of AISD graduates remained stable for the Class of 2007 (63.0%), compared with 62.6% of graduates in 2006 (Garland, 2008). Enrollment in 4-year colleges decreased from 38.0% in 2006 to 37.0% in 2007. Enrollment in 2-year institutions, increased from 23.3% in 2006 to 26.0% in 2007.

Differences in postsecondary enrollment rates for the Class of 2007 were evident across the high schools. Similar to previous school years, the schools with the lowest postsecondary enrollment rates also had the highest percentages of economically disadvantaged students in their 2007 graduating class (Garland, 2008). At Johnston, Reagan, Travis, and Lanier, at least 66% of graduating students were categorized as economically disadvantaged, and less than 40% of students enrolled in a postsecondary institution. At high schools where 5% to 22% of graduates were categorized as economically disadvantaged (i.e., Anderson, Bowie, McCallum, and LBJ-Magnet), at least 71% of 2007 graduates enrolled in postsecondary institutions.

Support for College Preparation and Enrollment

The High School Exit Survey (Malerba & Ware, 2008) also provided information about the students' perspectives related to college preparation and support. Across all high schools, 60% of students reported high levels of satisfaction with Project ADVANCE program services and with their ADVANCE facilitator. Students (64%) also found ADVANCE staff particularly helpful with their college searches, college applications completion, and financial aid processes.

Next to the Project ADVANCE facilitator, students reported their parents as having had a major 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 their parents supported their post-graduation plans “a great deal.” However, the students indicated the financial aid process was still difficult for their parents and themselves to understand.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Across the district, Project ADVANCE staff continued to serve as a significant resource in 2007–2008 for postsecondary enrollment preparation. The program facilitators provided a substantial number of college preparation and financial opportunities for many students and their parents. Although student participation did decline between the 2006–2007 and 2007–2008 school years, the majority of the 2008 seniors (85%) attended at least one college preparation and/or financial aid event during their high school years. Approximately 76% of seniors completed an application to some type of postsecondary institution.

The schools offered varying numbers of opportunities for student and parent participation across campuses and more continuity may be needed. For example, one campus conducted 2 college visits, while another campus provided 12 opportunities for students to visit a college during a single school year. One campus provided 1 major college preparation event, while another conducted more than 80 college preparation events. It is recommended that a minimum standard be set and all campuses provide comparable opportunities for participation.

Increased communication and collaboration across campuses may provide additional opportunities for students to participate.

Parent involvement is an important factor in college preparation. Fifty-six percent 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 continued to reveal low parent participation levels. To ensure that students and their parents are getting the most accurate college preparation information and most effective 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. A large number of students and their family members received assistance with negotiating financial aid systems for college enrollment, and about half of those who received support were economically disadvantaged. Unfortunately the percentage of economically disadvantaged high school students receiving support (18.0%) was much lower than the proportion of economically disadvantaged high school students across the district (55.3%). Furthermore, results from the High School Exit Survey indicated that some students were still experiencing difficulty understanding the financial aid process. It is recommended that program facilitators discuss future financial aid event implementation and outreach concerns to ensure that increasing numbers of both students and parents are able to participate. Services should be targeted toward those at risk of not enrolling in college based on their financial concerns and circumstances.

College admissions test taking and performance are critical components of becoming enrolled in a postsecondary institution. Project ADVANCE staff communicated the importance of test taking, and most seniors completed a college admissions test. However, academic preparation issues were reflected in the range in average SAT and ACT scores found across campuses. Unfortunately, inadequacies in the students' academic preparation may affect their options for enrollment in a postsecondary institution. Students may not be able to enroll in the college of their choice or qualify for financial assistance based on their academic achievement, as measured by the SAT or ACT. ADVANCE staff might consider working with student advisors and counselors to help students develop plans for preparing for SAT and ACT tests and closely monitor their academic achievement well before the senior year.

Program reports and meeting documents revealed variable program implementation practices. In some cases, relationships and systems appeared to function well at the campus and/or district levels. However, coordination of services and collaboration with other programs or initiatives at the campus and/or district level may have been lacking in other cases. Increased communication, coordination, and collaboration would enable school and program staff to extend their outreach efficiently to all high school students and their parents, possibly increasing the likelihood of students being well prepared for postsecondary enrollment. It is recommended that this work be managed at the district level

to coordinate ADVANCE supported opportunities across all campuses.

Increased coordination is challenging considering the programmatic and staffing changes within and across high schools. Many new programs and initiatives were offered in 2007-2008, and the teaching and administrative staff at each high school experienced turnover. Thus, additional and ongoing communication and relationship development between ADVANCE staff and other campus or program staff at the campus and district levels may be needed to ensure continuity in student services within and across schools.

Program staff and school administrators also should be thoughtful about using resources effectively as they coordinate services. 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 allow staff to 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.

Finally, the program results 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. Furthermore, other programs and school staff offered college and career preparation services in the high schools; thus, student outcomes may not be attributable to any single program.

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