AISD REACH Program:
Summary of Findings from 2007–2008 Through 2012–2013

Introduction

After the first cohort of schools in Austin Independent School District (AISD) joined the AISD REACH program in 2007–2008, the program expanded each year until 2012–2013, when all educators at 38 high-poverty schools participated. The program required educators to establish learning goals for their students and provided a variety of supports to enhance classroom instructional practices. The program rewarded those who demonstrated success, and provided incentives for educators to work in high-poverty schools. A variety of programs and initiatives were implemented at REACH schools during the same time period; thus, attributing the success of REACH schools to the REACH program alone is not possible. However, a body of evaluation research from 6 years of the program provided evidence REACH likely influenced student performance, teacher practices, and novice teacher retention.

The ever-changing population of program schools, and the resulting elimination of potential similar non-REACH comparison schools, created challenges for longitudinal analyses and for the isolation of program effects. Additionally, the targeted nature of certain program elements (i.e., SLOs, PDUs, Peer Observation) likely restricted the possibility of finding significant linkages between the program and the types of broad student and teacher outcomes that were available for research. Nevertheless, some favorable program effects did emerge. A summary of the program's influence on student performance at REACH schools and findings for each program element are listed below.[1]

Student Performance at REACH Schools

Many REACH schools had greater passing rates than did their comparison school peers on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and State of Texas Assessment for Academic Readiness (STAAR), and also often demonstrated greater longitudinal gains than did comparison schools. High school math and reading/English language arts (ELA) classrooms showed significantly greater gains than did comparison classrooms, and elementary and middle school students served for at least 3 years in REACH elementary and middle schools improved significantly in reading over time. In fact, REACH middle school students improved significantly more over time in reading than did their comparison school peers.

REACH Student Performance Successes

◊ REACH schools had greater passing rates and gains on TAKS and STAAR than comparison schools

◊ REACH math and English language arts high school classrooms showed greater gains than comparison classrooms

◊ REACH middle school students showed greater reading improvement than their peers at comparison schools

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[1] For a complete review of findings and references for sources, see the full report, DRE Publication No. 12.96.

Student Learning Objectives

Educators at participating schools were trained in and supported with the practice of establishing and working toward the achievement of two student learning objectives (SLOs). Each year, approximately 81% to 87% of educators met the stipend criteria for at least one SLO, though the rates at which teachers met SLOs varied due to factors such as school level, teaching assignment, and school SLO requirements. Overall, evidence suggested most teachers believed the SLO process improved their teaching, and that experience with SLOs may have enhanced teachers' data use and professional collaboration. Additionally, results indicated some benefits for students in the areas their teachers targeted with SLOs. However, evidence regarding the link between students' performance on state assessments and SLOs was not conclusive.

REACH Student Learning Objective Successes

◊ Teachers believed SLOs improved their teaching

◊ Teachers who used SLOs collaborated more and used data more than teachers at similar schools who did not use SLOs

◊ Students benefitted in areas their teachers targeted with SLOs

Peer Observation

A late program addition, peer observation, provided classroom observation and feedback to classroom teachers at participating schools, starting in 2011–2012. Evidence indicated many teachers valued the quality of feedback they received, and the majority of teachers reported peer observation was a good idea. Some teachers reported concerns that peer observers did not have teaching experience in their own content area or grade level, but evidence suggested peer observation was a reliable and valid measure of teachers' classroom instruction. Most teachers were satisfied with the support they received from their peer observer and agreed their peer observer collaborated with them to improve their teaching; however, results did not show peer observation changed teachers' instructional practices in the specific ways that were measured. Better ways of assessing the influence of peer observation on teachers' classroom instruction are necessary.

REACH Peer Observation Successes

◊ Teachers valued the quality of feedback peer observers provided

◊ Peer observation was a reliable and valid measure of teachers' classroom instruction

Professional Development Units (PDUs)

Professional development units (PDUs) were among the most favorably received among all elements of the REACH program. The vast majority of teachers who

participated in an optional PDU valued the PDU experience and believed it influenced their instruction. Most PDU participants each year also demonstrated their studies had made a sufficient impact on students' learning and on their instruction, earning stipends for their accomplishments. Teachers' PDU scores reflected their performance on other measures of effective teaching, suggesting PDU scores were a valid measure of instructional effectiveness. Although the influence of PDUs on specific student outcomes was challenging to establish due to the self-selected sample of participants, analyses with matched samples of participants and nonparticipants showed some positive results for participants.

REACH Professional Development Unit Successes

◊ Participating educators valued the PDU experience and believed it influenced their instruction

◊ Most participants demonstrated positive results for students as a result of their PDU

◊ PDU scores were consistent with other measures of instructional effectiveness

Novice Teacher Mentoring

Educators at REACH schools strongly valued the mentoring program and the support it provided for new teachers, as well as for the faculty as a whole. Between 2007–2008 and 2012–2013, 1,000 REACH teachers in their first 3 years of teaching received formal, ongoing support from full-time mentors, who each served approximately 10 new teachers. Evidence showed mentors focused on teachers' unique instructional needs, and that students of REACH novice teachers performed comparably to students of their more experienced peers. REACH novice teachers had greater self-efficacy than did their peers at similar non-REACH schools, and REACH mentoring support was related to novice teacher retention. However, although REACH novice teachers were retained at a greater rate than their comparison peers while they were being served, the influence of mentoring on teacher retention was not sustained.

REACH Novice Teacher Mentoring Successes

◊ Educators of all types valued the mentoring program

◊ Novice teacher retention was greater at REACH than comparison schools

◊ Students of REACH novice teachers performed as well as students of their more experienced peers

◊ REACH mentoring support was related to greater teaching self-efficacy

Schoolwide Growth Stipends

Some favorable schoolwide results for performance on state assessments were found; however, evidence did not suggest the REACH schoolwide growth stipends for gains in reading and mathematics operated effectively as incentives. Additionally, no relationship was found between performance on schoolwide goals and factors such as years in the program; teachers' instructional practices (i.e., data use, collaboration, and reflective teaching); or SLO performance. However, results provided evidence for cautious optimism regarding the influence of establishing schoolwide attendance rate goals.

Recruitment and Retention Stipends

Although evidence suggested novice teacher mentoring influenced teacher retention, the influence of REACH recruitment and retention stipends was unclear. Evidence suggested over time the retention stipend may have become more important to teachers' retention decisions. However, data showed an initial increase in teacher retention rates for participating schools, but a lack of sustained effect on retention rates over time. Retention rates did not appear to have improved substantially for teachers at REACH schools relative to teachers in other AISD schools.

Conclusion

Results indicated program success with regard to students' passing rates and gains on state assessments, and suggested a possible relationship between SLOs and students' performance on state assessments. The program also appeared to have influenced teachers' professional collaboration and data use, and results showed a positive program influence on novice teachers' retention rates. Additionally, continuous feedback from participants suggested the program benefitted teachers in a variety of other ways. For example, PDU participants consistently reported PDUs were valuable and supported their instruction. Although the influence of PDUs on broad student outcomes was not established, each PDU was scored on the impact it made for students in the specific area of focus. The fact that most PDUs demonstrated an impact on students in a specific area suggests the PDU process did indeed foster instructional practices that resulted in improved student achievement.

However, little evidence was found that schoolwide growth or retention stipends facilitated the desired results. Results did not indicate rewards either for schoolwide growth in reading or math, or for achieving the basket of measures, were effective incentives. Teachers described not only a lack of understanding about how to achieve the necessary reading and math performance gains, but also a lack of awareness regarding the schoolwide goals that were in their basket of measures. With the exception of attendance rate goals, the basket of measures did not appear to have influenced schoolwide performance in targeted areas. Additionally, retention rates for teachers at participating schools did not suggest the program made a significant difference for teachers' retention rates. Although the retention rates may have improved for some schools, an overall program effect on retention was not evident. Thus, the retention stipends did not operate as intended.

Additional evidence regarding the nuanced influence of specific program elements (e.g., peer observation and PDUs) would provide more information about the aspects of the program that are most critical for supporting high quality instruction. Nevertheless, the review of AISD REACH evaluation research to date suggests the program as a whole supported teachers and students at high-poverty schools in ways that facilitated educator development and student performance.