

Project GLAD[®] Focus Group Summary

Spring 2016

Overview

In April 2016, Austin Independent School District's (AISD) Department of Research and Evaluation (DRE) conducted five focus groups at Webb Middle School. The participants included program coordinators and teachers who were trained in Project Guided Language Acquisition Design (Project GLAD) in the summer of 2015. DRE staff moderated the discussion, and participants' responses were audio recorded and transcribed by DRE staff. This report summarizes some of the response themes that emerged from questions that were posed during the focus groups.

Benefits of Project GLAD

Teachers and program coordinators were quick to list a few key strengths of Project GLAD. The following are some of the benefits staff cited.

- Student participation was encouraged.
 - Staff maintained that the primary benefit of Project GLAD is that it encourages students to speak more during class and practice their language and communication skills.
 - Teachers and coordinators also expressed appreciation for Project GLAD's emphasis on group-based learning opportunities, which foster equal opportunities for participation from all students.
- Visual aids made content accessible at all times.
 - Nearly all teachers commented that Project GLAD's charts and wall anchors are especially useful to English language learners (ELLs).
 - Because the visual aids remain displayed on the walls of the classroom, they provide students with a physical point of reference when they need to recall information. Some teachers commented that the visual aids help students organize their thoughts and take an active role in their own learning.
 - For example, one teacher remarked, "I really like the posters. I feel like the kids are actually more engaged with the work. It's always up in the room; they can always reference it. And I feel like it's been easier for us to spiral back into things when we've got these posters."

- Different types of learners (e.g., auditory, visual, kinesthetic) were targeted.
 - Project GLAD’s strategies include oratory exercises, visual demonstrations, and movement around the classroom. Teachers commented that this multi-faceted approach helps address the needs of students’ various learning styles.
 - For example, one staff member stated, “(Students) get to hear it. They’re looking at it. They get to write it down. They get to talk about it. So, it’s hitting the different aspects of their learning.”

Challenges of Project GLAD

Overall, focus group participants voiced more challenges than benefits with Project GLAD. Following is a summary of the major challenges cited by teachers and program coordinators.

- The model was difficult to apply to middle school students and structure.
 - Teachers noted that some of the strategies (e.g., chanting) are too juvenile for higher-grade-level students. Concerns were also voiced regarding the lack of rigor, especially for students in pre-advanced placement courses.
 - Some staff expressed the belief that Project GLAD is ineffective for departmentalized courses. They suggested that having the same group of students all day, as in elementary school, might be more conducive to Project GLAD.
 - For instance, one teacher remarked, “The units we saw modeled (in the training) were 6-week units that incorporated every subject, so whatever the students were studying, it was in a self-contained classroom. It’s hard to teach that same level of incorporating Project GLAD when we only have our students for 50 minutes a day.”
- The program was labor intensive and costly.
 - Many teachers and coordinators expressed concern about the time required to create the materials. In describing this task, one teacher said, “When you’re doing an anchor chart, you have to create four of them, one for each class. That’s very time consuming. We improvise so that we’re not having to create four different posters for four different classes. It’s hard; the preparation for it is a lot.”
 - The staff also felt they did not have enough time to plan their curricula and incorporate Project GLAD strategies into those curricula.

What is Project GLAD®?

Project Guided Language Acquisition Design (Project GLAD) is a professional development model aimed at improving language acquisition and academic literacy. It involves specific instructional strategies that help teachers who have large numbers of ELLs integrate English instruction with grade-level content.



BE GLAD™ LLC provides teacher-training sessions, which include informational workshops on research and effective strategies, as well as in-class demonstrations and follow-up coaching. For more information about Project GLAD, visit <http://begladtraining.com/>



- Program coordinators expressed their concerns about the financial resources required to train staff and the costs associated with ongoing support from Project GLAD-certified coaches.
- Staff needed more support, training, and accountability.
 - Teachers and program coordinators conveyed dissatisfaction with the availability of support from Project GLAD coaches, particularly timely and useful feedback on how to best implement the strategies. Teachers of English/language arts (ELA) were more vocal than were other teachers about the challenges they experienced in finding examples for their specific content area. Program coordinators acknowledged the lack of resources available to help teachers develop units in ELA with Project GLAD.
 - Program coordinators and teachers cited challenges such as a lack of training for teachers who were hired mid year as well as ongoing professional development opportunities for teachers who were trained in the summer.
 - Some staff expressed a desire for more involvement from the school's administration and more communication from the program's leadership about their expectations for program implementation. For example, one teacher commented, "I think a challenge is that there was no follow through. As the year progressed, there was nobody checking if we had Project GLAD in our classrooms. There was nobody coming in to give us support, which essentially led to teachers not wanting to do it at all."
 - Multiple participants suggested that more collaboration was needed between teachers, administration, on-site and off-site program coordinators, as well as staff from various central office departments.

Changes Observed as a Result of Project GLAD

While some participants reported positive changes as a result of Project GLAD, others maintained that the program had little to no effect on student achievement. The following is a summary of the changes—or lack thereof—that staff reported observing since the implementation of Project GLAD during the 2014–2015 school year.

- Use of English in the classrooms increased.
 - With students participating more frequently in classroom conversations, many teachers and program coordinators noted an improvement in ELLs' use of academic English. One teacher asserted, "I'm sure it's done wonders for their vocabulary and their language acquisition."
 - Program coordinators commented that teachers were using less Spanish in the classroom as students' proficiency in English increased.
- Some teachers had a heightened awareness of the value of differentiated instruction.
 - A few teachers described Project GLAD's strategies as helping them to provide students with appropriate scaffolds, depending on the students' language proficiency and cognitive development. For example, one teacher said, "It's made me think, 'How is each class different, and how do I need to direct each lesson according to the differences of each child within each class?' I've been helped because of some of the strategies of Project GLAD."

- Some teachers felt more engaged with their teaching as a result of Project GLAD.
 - For example, one teacher commented, “For me, I’m having more fun. It’s more fun than, ‘Here are the notes; take them,’ which was the style we were doing a few years ago.”
 - A couple of teachers expressed their appreciation that Project GLAD entails more than teaching to the test. For instance, one teacher remarked, “This school has been notoriously focused on testing. So for me, Project GLAD was an excuse to do it the right way, which is to have kids not work on worksheets all the time, but to actually teach them something. That was very empowering.”
- Other teachers felt the program had not produced sufficient results to warrant its continued implementation.
 - For instance, one teacher commented, “In an age when we are all about test taking and teaching to the test, it showed when we got our middle-of-year test (scores); the rigor wasn’t there. Kids weren’t able to apply what they learned from the Project GLAD strategies to the test.”
 - Multiple teachers admitted to dropping the use of Project GLAD during the first semester due to perceived ineffectiveness.



Conclusion

In summary, the majority of staff who participated in the focus groups believed that Project GLAD benefited students who were beginning to learn English. However, staff expressed some doubt about whether the strategies were appropriate for all students in all courses. While some teachers thought the program had improved students’ engagement, other teachers maintained that the program lacked the necessary rigor to help students pass state assessments. Almost all staff agreed that if future implementation of the program were to be successful, more resources and support would be needed.

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