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Summary of the Reward Schools Case Study Project

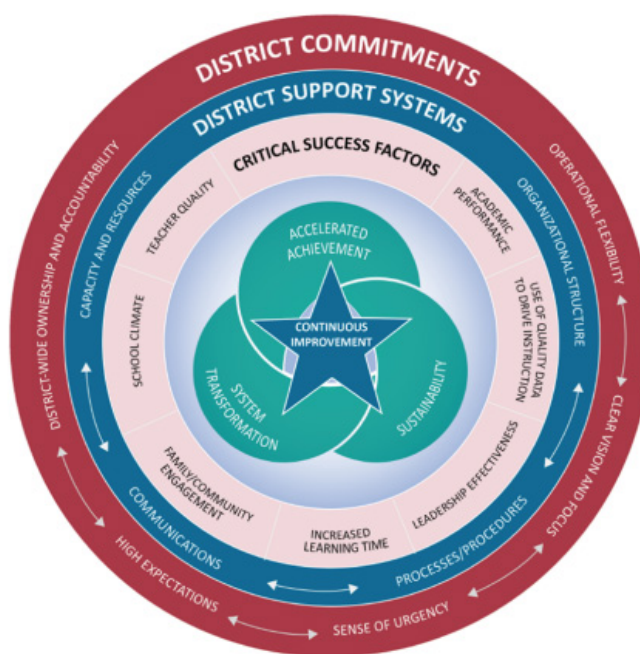
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Background

In September of 2013, the state of Texas secured a conditional waiver from the U.S. Department of Education for specific provisions of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). In the conditional waiver, the requirement for Distinguished School identification was replaced by the High Performing and High Progress Reward Schools designation (for more details, see http://www.tea.state.tx.us/ESEAFlex_Principle2.aspx). In accordance with the waiver, the state will celebrate and recognize schools designated as Reward Schools. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) at SEDL, an affiliate of American Institutes for Research, developed an initiative to implement a best-practice case studies project with the goal of Reward Schools with districts recognizing and sharing their success stories with the state and other Local Educational Agencies (LEAs). The results of the participating Reward Schools will be distributed as best practice documents through Texas school improvement trainings. By spotlighting the schools' best practices, the TEA and TXCC seek to share the schools' stories with the hopes of other schools replicating their practices and successes. The final reports from the case studies will be available to all Texas schools via the TEA's website as well as distributed in school improvement trainings.

The underlying framework for the Reward Schools Case Study project is based on TEA's theory of action for turning around low-performing schools, the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS). According to the TEA, "TAIS is the aligned intervention process for both state and federal accountability requirements. This system is a research-based school improvement process that is aligned to critical success factors and combines data analysis, needs assessment, improvement planning, and continues monitoring." (<http://tea.texas.gov/pmi/accountabilitymonitoring/>). TAIS aligns with the ESEA school turnaround principals through seven critical success factors (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. The Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS)



A SNAPSHOT OF THE REWARD SCHOOLS

Schools Selected to Participate in the Case Study:

- Blackshear Elementary (Austin ISD)
- Castleberry High School (Castleberry ISD)
- Glen Cove Elementary (Ysleta ISD)
- Glenwood Elementary (Amarillo ISD)
- Los Fresnos High School (Los Fresnos CISD)
- North Garland High School (Garland ISD)
- Ortiz Elementary (Brownsville ISD)
- Park Place Elementary (Houston ISD)
- Pittsburg Intermediate School (Pittsburg ISD)
- Uplift Summit International Preparatory Middle School (charter school)
- Yes Prep West Middle School (charter school)

2013-2014 Reward Schools Case Study Project Characteristics

- Number of schools in project: 11
- Number of schools by level:
- Elementary: 5
- Intermediate (grades 5-6): 1
- High school: 3
- Charter (grades 6-8): 1
- Charter (grades 6-9): 1

2013-2014 Reward Schools Student Demographics (average for all case study schools)

- 84% Economically Disadvantaged (i.e., students eligible to receive free or reduced price lunch),
- 25% English language learners,
- 8% Special Education,
- 11% Student mobility rate
- 74% Hispanic,
- 10% African American, and
- 15% White or Other ethnicity.

As shown in Figure 1, the Critical Success Factors (CSFs) are:

1. **Academic Performance**
2. **Use of Quality Data to Drive Instruction**
3. **Leadership Effectiveness**
4. **Increase Learning Time**
5. **Family and Community Engagement**
6. **School Climate**
7. **Teacher Quality**

The CSFs guided the development of the research design and instruments the TEA and TXCC team designed for this case study project. The instruments consisted of an in-depth interview for school principals, focus group protocols and questions for teachers and staff, and, for those schools who indicated strong collaboration with central office staff, an in-depth interview for district staff. For example, some schools described an extensive working relationship with their District Coordinator of School Improvement. For those schools, the district staffer was also interviewed.

Selection of Sample of Case Study Schools

TEA shared 2012-2013 accountability data with the TXCC team on all schools across the state (n=8,533 campuses). The TEA and TXCC team decided the sample of Title 1 campuses in the case study project should consist of 11 Reward Schools that faced numerous challenges, such as student populations in which 50% or more of the students were economically disadvantaged and student mobility rates were 10% or higher (see left sidebar for a description of the sample of rewards schools). The TEA and TXCC team also wanted a diverse sample of schools with small and large student populations, schools in urban and rural areas, charter and public schools, and schools across geographic regions in the state. In 2012-2013, the state accountability ratings for the 11 Reward Schools were:

- Met Standard on Student Achievement, and
- Met Standard on Student Progress.

Results of the Case Study

TXCC used the CSFs as the underlying theory of action to understand the factors, processes, and structures that resulted in the successes of the case study schools. Therefore, the results of the case studies of the 11 Reward Schools are presented in terms of the CSFs. For

each CSF, the study highlights practices from two schools that show compelling evidence of a CSF implementation. All schools in the project are represented.

Critical Success Factor 1 – Academic Performance

Blackshear Elementary and Ortiz Elementary. The principals, teachers, and staff at both Blackshear and Ortiz Elementary schools described the following schoolwide strategies they implement to increase the academic performance of their students.

- Clear focus on implementation of targeted strategies
- Consistency in routines and strategies across grade-levels

Clear focus on implementation of targeted strategies. The principal and staff at Blackshear Elementary described their approach to instruction as being aligned to the school motto that is applied to all students, “Together we Educate, Enrich, and Exercise to Excel.” The principal described this strategy as a way to evaluate ideas and programs. She said, “So, I always tell individuals, if they want to try something new on campus then, which of those areas does it fall into? Is it an educational program? Is it exercise or is it enrichment? So that we stay focused and we know where to put our resources.” The staff and principal also discussed using creative learning strategies to enrich the educational experiences of Blackshear students.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“I want them [students] to be exposed to great literature. You should hear the way they [students] speak – the vocabulary, the images – that’s how they fall in love with the curriculum.”

-Principal Werbiski of Ortiz Elementary.

At Ortiz Elementary, the principal and district administrator noted that teachers and staff at Ortiz Elementary focus on implementing “a few things well.” Though they may change a strategy, teachers stick to a scope and sequence plan developed by matching learner needs to best practice. The principal oversees implementation with frequent classroom walkthroughs and by attending grade-level and vertical team meetings. Their district administrator noted that Ortiz is successful with the same strategies available to the rest of the district because they are intent on matching the right strategy to the right content and then to the right learner. Since they are not constantly re-inventing the wheel,

Ortiz staff has the time to apply strategies in a targeted and mindful way.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“One strategy is routine, exposing the students to the Fluency Program on a daily basis. What we have done with this program is that we are focusing on the first 1,000 words in English which are high frequency, which are supposed to be the words that you can find - 70% of the words in any written document that you pick up.”

– Principal Jenkins of Blackshear Elementary

Consistency in routines and strategies across grade-levels. The other schoolwide strategy Blackshear and Ortiz Elementary staff discussed was consistency in school routines and curriculum where content is vertically aligned. The Blackshear School Leadership team and other teacher- and staff-led committees developed instructional plans, resources, the master schedule, and materials in the summer before school began.

Ortiz Elementary also approaches all instruction vertically. Testing celebrations at Ortiz include the lower grades, demonstrating that the success of 3rd grade students is due in large part to the preparation

they received during their earlier grades. Lower grade teachers regularly examine upper grade standards in weekly faculty meetings, adjusting their instruction to support areas where current upper grade students are struggling. For example, when the school noticed that the 5th grade students were behind on science vocabulary, it became a schoolwide challenge and all teachers, including the elective teachers, incorporated a science word of the day and enriched their word walls.

In addition to vertical planning, teachers at Ortiz collaborate constantly with their grade-level team. They meet before each six weeks to plan a scope and sequence and receive turn-key training from a colleague that recently attended district training on the upcoming standards. Together with the Dean of Instruction, the teachers share what is working in their classrooms and ask for advice (or a model lesson) from colleagues that demonstrate success on a particular strategy or standard.

Critical Success Factor 2 – Use of Quality Data to Drive Instruction

Castleberry High School and Park Place Elementary. The principals, teachers, and staff at Castleberry High School and Park Place Elementary described implementing the following strategies when collecting, analyzing, and using data to drive instruction:

- Continuous monitoring of all students' progress
- Frequent and regular data meetings

BEST PRACTICE

Teachers at Castleberry High School discussed using spreadsheets to identify which students have passed/not passed class, district and state assessments in core subjects, and on TEKS standards. Teachers then work within Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to spiral this feedback into lesson plans and target intervention strategies for particular students. Teachers mentioned how they regularly include students when reviewing their performance data and leading classroom discussions that break down student performance by test item.

Continuous monitoring of all students' progress.

Staff at Castleberry High School and Park Place Elementary described how they continuously monitor students' academic progress by collecting and placing student performance data generated from formative assessments, benchmark exams, and STAAR or other state exams on "data walls", or in spreadsheets, binders, or computer systems. For example, teachers and principals at Park Place Elementary maintain a "data wall" that includes daily snapshots of each individual student at the school. Staff organize students by tiers that are color coded to indicate achievement levels. All teachers monitor both school-level data and that of

the individual students to whom they are assigned. Park Place Elementary teachers and staff monitor various sources of student data, including teacher observations, conversations with parents, and student interests. Park Place Elementary teachers discussed maintaining a binder that has individual student performance data linked to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standards. These binders include the cumulative information generated from all types of ongoing assessments used by teachers to track individual student performance. According to Principal Trinh of Park Place Elementary, "I do require that they [teachers] have snapshots and district assessment data in the binder."

The Castleberry High School principal and staff discussed how the school leadership teams utilize computer-based data visualization systems, such as Eduphoria, to monitor student progress. The school staff and leadership compare student performance on first six-week curriculum based assessments (CBAs) to previous year STAAR results and to district benchmarks. Castleberry High School staff

mentioned how monitoring student data allows them to identify students in need of additional help in specific subjects as well as identifying particular curriculum standards that are not being taught successfully. Castleberry High School staff described monitoring student data in every subject, including electives.

Frequent and regular data meetings. Staff at both Castleberry High School and Park Place Elementary discussed organizing and participating in regular meetings to review student data. During Professional Learning Community (PLC) monthly meetings at Castleberry High School and Park Place Elementary, teachers study and discuss student performance data to determine problem areas requiring additional focus.

Park Place’s Leadership Support Team and district coach look at student performance from the previous year in terms of student attendance, discipline referrals, STAAR achievement, and English language learners’ proficiency in order to identify one or two areas of focus for the year. The Leadership Support Team and district coach set goals for various performance indicators, including attendance, discipline, and STAAR performance, and submit these to the district in addition to the Shared Decision Making Committee and entire staff at Park Place.

Critical Success Factor 3 – Leadership Effectiveness

Los Fresnos High School and Blackshear Elementary. When asked questions about leadership effectiveness, the teachers, principals, and staff at Los Fresnos High School and Blackshear Elementary discussed the following practices:

- Clear communication of expectations
- Delegation of tasks

Clear communication of expectations. The teachers, district staff, and principal at Los Fresnos High School discussed how the principal is the instructional leader of the school. The district representative explained that the district superintendent provides clear expectations to school staff and is very supportive of principals making decisions based on the best interest of students. The Los Fresnos principal is passionate that all students should hold high expectations for their lives and has integrated a college-going culture in the school. Los Fresnos staff discussed how the principal conducts classroom observations and gives instructional feedback to teachers. The superintendent reviews all notes from the classroom walk-throughs to ensure that principals are providing instructionally driven feedback to teachers.

The teachers, staff, and principal at Blackshear Elementary discussed how Principal Jenkins communicates in a frequent, clear, and effective way with everyone in the school. Ms. Jenkins uses a weekly newsletter, a large calendar outside her office that staff update, and her presence and voice to communicate schoolwide expectations for teachers, staff, and students. Teachers and Ms. Jenkins mentioned how she emails them a weekly newsletter every Sunday night that reminds them of upcoming events, and the principal’s expectations for teachers and students. The newsletter also serves as way for Ms. Jenkins to acknowledge and publically appreciate the staff. As one teacher said, “Every Sunday we get a newsletter about what our expectations are for high academic and behavioral performance so

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“The principal knows who all the students are at Los Fresnos HS and how they are progressing, not only on the tests but also in class. The key is knowing the kids and where they are coming from.”

– Executive Director of
Academics at Los Fresnos
Consolidated Independent
School District

she [Ms. Jenkins] gives us ideas from books. She also does appreciations to the staff and they're specific about why she appreciates everyone."

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

"I think that's great because a lot of schools that are in our situation, you have a principal that's just the dictator and there's constant eyes on you type of thing. We just didn't feel like we're being watched by the police. It's more of a team, 'we're going to do this together' type of thing."

-Blackshear Elementary teacher

Delegation of tasks. Another strategy of effective leadership was the principals' delegation of tasks. At Los Fresnos, participants mentioned that the principal effectively delegates among the school administration to share tasks of monitoring student academic and socio-emotional wellbeing. At Blackshear, the principal, teachers, and staff discussed how the principal assigned teachers and staff to the School Leadership Team, Campus Advisory Council, or other committees in the school where they had specific roles and duties. Principal Jenkins explained how she holds staff accountable to these roles and duties. However, as staff described, they do not feel "policed" or micromanaged by Ms. Jenkins.

Critical Success Factor 4 – Increase Learning Time

Pittsburg Intermediate School and North Garland High School. The staff at Pittsburg Intermediate School and North Garland High School discussed implementing the following strategies to increase learning time:

- Before and after-school tutoring
- Interventions

Before and after-school tutoring. At Pittsburg Intermediate, staff mentioned that teachers work with students before school as early as 7:30 a.m., during lunch, and after school to address individual needs, such as strategies for problem solving or to work on vocabulary. The teachers indicated that students know teachers are there to support and help them to succeed. At North Garland High School, teachers and staff discussed that students can stay after school and take labs, tutorials, and computer-based courses to address areas of weakness. Some students receive tutorials two to three times per week. Saturday tutorials are also an option.

BEST PRACTICE

In North Garland High School's Cycle Recovery Program, students who fail a 6-week exam can attend a lab after school and for the following grading cycle to recover that credit without having to repeat the full course.

Interventions. Staff at both schools discussed how interventions are used to increase students' learning time. At North Garland High School, staff mentioned how the Response to Intervention (RtI) coordinator is instrumental in coordinating with students and teachers to ensure students recover credits. They said the RtI coordinator manages a caseload of 500 students at any given time. The teachers and staff at Pittsburg Intermediate School also discussed the importance of intervention. They described how interventionists work closely with classroom teachers to ensure they are reinforcing the concepts being taught in the classroom. All interventionists are experienced teachers with a history of classroom experience. School staff believes strongly in interventionists because of the importance they place on

individual time with a teacher. These small intervention groups allow the school to extend classroom learning and provide individualized support.

Critical Success Factor 5 – Increase Family and Community Engagement

Glen Cove Elementary and YES Prep West Middle School. The teachers, principals, and staff at Glen Cove Elementary and YES Prep West Middle School discussed using the following strategies to increase family and community engagement:

- Events and activities for families
- Continuous outreach and contact with families

Events and activities for families. Staff at Glen Cove Elementary described many events and activities they provide for students and their families. The school’s Parent Teacher Organization provides direct support to teachers by assisting with activities, including classroom decorating, participation in events, and helping with school day routines. The school hosts parent wellness (Wellness Wednesday), cooking, and Common Sense Parenting classes. The staff also shared how they organize parent mathematics and reading “academies” to inform parents of the instructional practices they use with students. During the academy, teachers demonstrate lessons, share basic concepts and academic standards, and show parents the books and materials they use in class. They also discussed activities such as Kite Day, Fishing Day, and parent-teacher softball games. Hundreds of families attend those events.

BEST PRACTICE

During campus service days at YES Prep West Middle School, staff and students working together to assist the community. In the past, the service days have included not only help with cleanup following natural disasters (e.g., flooding, hurricanes), but also volunteering to serve meals at a local homeless shelter or distributing food and clothing to local homeless residents.

Staff at YES Prep West Middle School also discussed events and activities they organize for families of their students. YES Prep’s activities and events are designed to build relationships with students’ families and the broader community (e.g., summer barbeque, Hispanic heritage night, Thanksgiving dinners, etc.). The campus leadership team also provides opportunities for members of the school community to engage for purposes related to student learning.

Continuous outreach and contact with families. Staff at both at Glen Cove Elementary and YES Prep West Middle School discussed the frequency and types of communication they have with students’ families. At

Glen Cove Elementary, staff indicated that teachers maintain weekly parent communication logs with the expectation that teachers keep in regular contact with parents—especially for students with specific needs—and that all contacts be documented. The principal (and some teachers) produce newsletters to keep parents informed of campus and class activities.

At Yes Prep West Middle School, staff described how teachers are expected to visit the homes of new students. During these home visits, teachers share YES Prep West’s commitment to family and community engagement, discuss specific procedures and activities, and begin building a relationship with their students’ families. Many family and community engagement events are also highlighted on the classroom and hallway walls so that teachers, students, and parents who visit the campus can be notified and/or reminded of upcoming events and activities.

Critical Success Factor 6 – Improve School Climate

Uplift Summit International Preparatory Middle School and Park Place Elementary. Staff at both Uplift Summit International Preparatory Middle School and Park Place Elementary discussed implementing the following strategies to improve school climate:

- Focus on positive behaviors
- Social support systems for students

Focus on positive behaviors. The principal, teachers, and staff at Park Place Elementary discussed how they focus on students' positive behaviors with the intention of minimizing disciplinary problems. The principal highlighted the school's use of the Triple R standard (see sidebar). Teachers use this program in their classrooms. Moreover, as Principal Trinh explains, teachers learn how to tailor their interventions to the context of a student's behavior. She said, "Our philosophy is [that] we have to highlight the positive. When a child is having a meltdown for example, that is not the time to explain what they are doing wrong. This is when they need rescuing. When a person is drowning is not the time to teach them to swim. Once they are in a safer place and calm then we can discuss what they did wrong—what is causing them to disconnect from the lesson. We use the word consequence versus punishment. We work on trying to replace negative behavior with a positive one."

At Uplift Summit International Preparatory Middle School, staff indicated that they also focus on student positive behavior. They use a Hero system, with tiered levels of merits or demerits, to manage any issues with positive discipline. As a result of the Hero system, staff report that the school has a low suspension rate. Teachers and staff want to keep students in the classroom and monitor students who may need more behavioral guidance. Staff believe that rewarding behaviors encourages positive behavior.

Social support systems for students. Staff at Park Place Elementary use Project CLASS, which is a social/interpersonal support system that describes specific steps students can take to "get the teacher's attention, follow instructions, calm down, use kind words, accept no, and accept feedback." The school also has a contract with the Houston Achievement Place organization that provides a counselor to meet with students in small groups once a week to help with social skills. Students requiring this support are recommended by a teacher, parent, or school counselor. The principal makes morning announcements to encourage use of Project CLASS and teachers post signs in their classrooms to remind students of the opportunity.

Uplift Summit International Preparatory Middle School staff also described systems of support for their students. For example, if a student has a failing grade, there is an immediate consultation with parents/family to discuss an action plan with each of the student's teachers. If there is a student discipline issue, there is an expectation and process designed to ensure that it is handled expediently. Staff at Uplift discussed how a team of four to seven teachers meet with students who are struggling and their families to creating a sense of "esprit de corps"/unity and responsibility among the teachers to help struggling students.

Critical Success Factor 7 – Increase Teacher Quality

Los Fresnos High School and Glenwood Elementary. Teachers, principals, and staff at both Los Fresnos High School and Glenwood Elementary discussed the following strategies they use to increase teacher quality:

- Professional development opportunities for teachers
- High expectations for teacher performance

Professional development opportunities for teachers. Teachers at both schools indicated a strong commitment to participating in professional development, especially if it is embedded in their current work and/or provided by other teachers on campus. At Glenwood, staff discussed how they are very selective with their professional development. The staff is not quick to grab onto new instructional ideas or methods unless they can be sure that it meets the needs of the students. They discussed being hesitant to commit to new training without the campus data indicating a need. Staff also discussed having opportunities to receive coaching provided by the school administrators. The coaching focuses on improving instruction and is connected to the previous week’s instructional goal. During the conferences following a classroom observation, there is always a praise point and an action plan developed for the next coaching session. This campus has a full time Curriculum Assessment Specialist whose main responsibility is to support teachers with instruction. She guides teachers in understanding difficult TEKS, models lessons, and provides a variety of resources.

At Los Fresnos, the staff discussed an approach to professional development that was similar to Glenwood’s. Staff development for Los Fresnos teachers and staff is a non-negotiable, and all educators are continually working to improve. The school’s professional development opportunities are driven by student data and the results of a yearly survey of teachers to assess their needs. The district offers targeted, differentiated interventions for teachers based on student performance, and the school and district closely monitor teacher outcomes. School administrators and district staff also attend staff development to make sure that the techniques from trainings are being used in the classroom with teachers and that they are effective in improving student outcomes. Teachers also mentioned co-teaching with a master teacher as a form of professional development.

IN THEIR OWN WORDS

“The school works to help teachers succeed – everyone is an overachiever. It is part of our daily routine.”

– U.S. History Teacher at Los Fresnos High School

High expectations for teacher performance. At both schools, principals, teachers, and staff discussed having high expectations for themselves and their ability to improve outcomes for students. Staff at Los Fresnos discussed how their school administrators base class assignment and course load on teacher performance, not necessarily seniority. The school also carefully selects teachers of special education and English learning students to make they have the best possible supports. The faculty at Los Fresnos considers themselves to be a family, and all staff work together to improve and make sure all students have the resources to succeed. Teacher retention is high, and the staff is driven to excel and improve because they are committed to the vision of the school.

Staff at Glenwood Elementary also discussed having high expectations for themselves. The teachers believe they are highly effective in the classroom and have a thorough understanding of teaching low-income students. The teacher focus group stated that their success “surprises people because other

campuses with the same population of students do not do as well.” The Glenwood teachers believe “they hold themselves to a high standard which trickles down to the students.”

Summary

The field researchers who conducted the case studies of the 11 Reward Schools described the schools as inviting, colorful, clean, and friendly. The building facilities and outside areas were neat and well maintained. Across the 11 schools, students and staff seemed happy. Findings from the analyses of the interviews and focus groups show the 11 Reward Schools had a clear and intentional focus on student academic achievement and wellbeing. Teachers, principals, and staff seemed committed and dedicated to continuing the high quality work they are doing in their schools to continue the success of their students. The findings from these case studies provide strong evidence why the 11 schools in this case study project deserve the recognition of being Reward Schools in the state of Texas.

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