

2015–16 Reward Schools Case Study Report

Daingerfield Junior High School

Daingerfield-Lone Star Independent
School District, Region 8

November 2016



Acknowledgments

This publication is part of a series of reports produced in 2016–17 about seven Reward School campuses that participated in a case study project. This report was developed with collaboration from the Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) at American Institutes for Research, Texas Education Agency (TEA), and the Texas Center for District and School Support (TCDSS) at the Region 13 Education Service Center (ESC). The following staff collaborated on this project: Mark Baxter (TEA), Deborah Brennan (TCDSS), Grace Fleming (TXCC), Lisa Gonzales (TEA), Allison Ivey (TCDSS), Angelica Herrera (TXCC), Cody Huie (TCDSS), Barry Link (TCDSS), CoCo Massengale (TXCC), Anne Post (Region 16 ESC), and Trent Sharp (TXCC). For additional information about the case study project, please contact Lisa Gonzales at Lisa.Gonzales@tea.texas.gov.

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Overview of the Reward Schools Case Studies Project

The state of Texas is home to more than 5 million primary and secondary public school students. From districts in major urban centers such as Houston and Dallas to those in rural areas far from cities, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) serves schools and students of all backgrounds. Similar to schools across the country, many Texas schools face difficult circumstances, including poverty and high rates of student mobility. Schools that receive Title I funding are especially likely to face these and other challenges. The objective of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is for the U.S. Department of Education to help address the greater educational challenges facing high-poverty communities by targeting additional resources to school districts and schools with high concentrations of poverty (ESEA of 1965). Decades of research have shown that poverty has a strong and negative impact on student academic performance (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003; Herbers et al., 2012).

Despite significant obstacles, 6 percent of Title I public schools in Texas have gone beyond meeting state standards to earning the distinction of Reward School status. Reward Schools share many similarities with low-performing schools in terms of student socioeconomic status and other demographic characteristics. However, Reward Schools have implemented practices that have allowed the schools to overcome these challenges and become high-performing learning institutions. TEA and the Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) developed an initiative in 2014–15 to implement a best practices case study project with the goal of recognizing the extraordinary accomplishments of Reward Schools and providing an opportunity for them to share their success stories with the state and other local educational agencies.

When the project began in 2014–15, eleven schools participated as case study sites (TEA, 2015). In 2015–16, seven new schools were selected to participate in the project. The purpose of this report is to present the findings from one of the seven newly participating schools. In addition to staff from TEA and TXCC, staff from the Texas Center for District and School Support (TCDSS) at Region 13 Education Service Center (ESC) joined the project and assisted with the fieldwork at the case study schools. TCDSS representatives also interviewed and videotaped school staff and students at three of the participating Reward School case study sites.¹

This report presents the findings from Daingerfield Junior High School (JHS) in Region 8. The report details the systems and structures Daingerfield JHS employs to use quality data to engage families and the larger school community and to foster a positive school climate. It also describes the ways Daingerfield-Lone Star Independent School District (ISD) supports the school in its efforts. For more details about the 2015–16 Reward Schools Case Studies Project, including the methodology the team used to conduct the case studies and aggregate findings from the analysis of data from the seven participating schools, with all seven Texas Accountability Intervention System critical success factors (CSFs) represented, please refer to the *2015–16 Reward Schools Statewide Report*.² The Statewide Report also includes the findings from the analysis of the aggregated student interview and school climate walkthrough data, which are not presented here because of the small sample size and potential breach of student confidentiality.

¹ Clips from the videos are available at <http://www.taisresources.net>. They are under the heading “Critical Success Factors” and are titled “Teacher Quality,” “Academic Performance,” “School Climate,” and “Use of Quality Data to Drive Instruction.”

² The *2015–16 Reward Schools Statewide Report* is available at [\[insert URL here\]](#)

Snapshot of Daingerfield Junior High School

2014–15 demographics:

- 237 students
- Grade span: 6–8
- 79% economically disadvantaged (i.e., students eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch)
- 8% English language learners
- 12% special education
- 12% student mobility rate
- 41% African American
- 19% Hispanic
- 34% White
- 6% other ethnicity

In 2014–15, the state accountability ratings for the school were:

- Met standard
- Distinction designations in academic achievement in social studies

Overview of Daingerfield-Lone Star Junior High School

Daingerfield JHS is located in Daingerfield, Texas, in Morris County. It is a small city of 2,500 people, just one hour from the Texas–Arkansas state line. The school is part of the Daingerfield-Lone Star ISD, supported by the Region 8 ESC. Both the district and the school serve students from Daingerfield and neighboring Lone Star, a 1,500-person city seven miles south of the Daingerfield city limits. Daingerfield JHS represents fully the spirit of the Reward Schools, having overcome an academically unacceptable rating in the 2009–10 school year to achieve a “met standard” rating for the past several years and earning distinction designations in core subjects and other school improvement areas. For example, in 2013–14, the school met five out of seven distinctions, including academic achievement in both reading and mathematics as well as recognition for being in the top 25 percent of Texas schools for both student progress and closing performance gaps. The school’s 2014–15 distinctions, along with detailed demographic data, are included in the snapshot on this page.

The research team visited Daingerfield JHS in mid-March 2016 and spent two days at the school conducting one-on-one interviews with the principal, district support staff, and 10 students. In addition, teachers participated in hour-long focus groups in which they shared stories and best practices from their school. The research team also conducted a walkthrough of the premises focused on the positive learning environment created at Daingerfield JHS. This report presents the results from the qualitative analyses of the principal and district staff interviews as well as the teacher focus groups. The data analysis was guided by the two CSFs highlighted in this case study (Family and Community Engagement and School Climate). To maintain the participants’ privacy and confidentiality, participants are not named.

Critical Success Factor 5: Family and Community Engagement

As the literature shows, family involvement in children’s education both at home and in school is a significant indicator of student performance (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). Recent research on the impact of community engagement with local schools has shown a positive relationship between engaging community members and student achievement (Kirby & DiPaola, 2011). Furthermore, research concludes that more parent involvement at elementary schools is associated with higher academic achievement (Lee & Bowen, 2006). The teachers and leadership team at Daingerfield JHS have several

strategies in place that have proven effective in encouraging familial involvement. These strategies are the following:

- Building community partnerships and
- Communicating with families

This section includes data from the on-site interviews and focus groups that illustrate ways Daingerfield JHS staff engage students' families and the school community.

Building Community Partnerships

As a school in a small community, Daingerfield JHS leadership and staff rely on adults in the surrounding area to encourage students and hold them accountable academically and behaviorally. To build community investment in their students, Daingerfield JHS hosts events that are open to the public, especially around the holidays (e.g., Martin Luther King Day and Christmas). In addition, the school enlists community members to serve in several mentoring programs at the school. One program—Brothers, Uncles, and Dads of Developing Youth (BUDDYs)—comes in regularly to meet with male students and recognize their achievements. Similarly, the school enlists community members in the Watchdog program, in which prominent members of the community (e.g., pastors and firefighters) come regularly to interact with the students, attend events, and deliver speeches about citizenship, success, and community. The school advertises events and opportunities to join the mentorship programs through a variety of channels, including the local newspaper and the school website. Leaders pointed out that because the community is small, Daingerfield JHS staff often rely on “*word of mouth and on the billboard down by the administration building; [school leaders] put the major events on the sign so when you go by you can see the marquee.*” Data collected during the March site visit reinforce the idea that school staff are comfortable leveraging the support of the greater Daingerfield-Lone Star community, and the staff were eager to provide examples of the generosity of their neighbors.

Communicating With Families

Interview and focus group participants at Daingerfield JHS described the extraordinary lengths building staff take to engage the families of their students. In addition to regular parent events—“*open houses, meet the parents. They're always invited; [we] have an open-door policy*”—leaders are present at a variety of sporting events, musical performances, and community gatherings. The leadership at Daingerfield JHS is known for meeting students' families where they are—whether it's at work, home, church, or local events. The leaders make an effort to immerse themselves in the lives of their students

Best Practice: Communication

“When I can't get [ahold of parents], I know where they work, so I call their jobs. If I can't catch them there, I know where they live. I've been in areas I didn't even know existed in Dangerfield or in Lone Star or in our area because I would go to their homes. Then, if I can't catch them there, I catch them at their churches.”

—Principal

and their families, conducting home visits and attending community functions to increase visibility and to demonstrate the school's commitment to its students.

Instructional staff also described a culture of frequent communication with families, primarily through *“constant phone calls. A lot of phone calls.”* Teachers said these calls vary widely in content and expressed a belief that parent contact *“doesn’t always have to be negative; it doesn’t always have to be positive. You try to get things out to the parents so they know what’s going on.”* In addition to phone calls, parents can receive updates about their students’ classes and grades online. One teacher provides a website where students and their parents can learn content: *“I’ve had parents tell me that they appreciate being able to see [posted videos]. Sometimes it’s a video of [me]; sometimes it’s a video of the curriculum—provided videos—that shows them how to do certain techniques and things like that so they can help because not all parents have a background [in the content area].”* Families who do not have Internet access at home can access the school’s computer labs to *“look up their child’s grades. They can look and see what’s missing, what they need to do.”* Parents also receive communication about the school through newsletters and fliers, all of which are available in Spanish.

The data collected during the site visit reveal several methods the administrative and instructional staff at Daingerfield JHS employ to engage their students’ families and the surrounding community. These efforts range from recruitment of community members to participate in school events and mentorship programs to daily communication between parents and teachers through multiple channels. Interviewed staff believe family and community engagement is essential to a successful school and their efforts contribute to the overall high student achievement at Daingerfield JHS.

Critical Success Factor 6: School Climate

Student achievement is higher in schools with healthy and positive learning environments (MacNeil, Prater, & Busch, 2009). Research on the impact of schoolwide positive behavioral supports in urban settings has shown that such systems have a positive impact on student performance and achievement and reduce disciplinary incidents (Lassen, Steele, & Sailor, 2006). Strong relationships between students and adults in the school setting have a positive effect on both student engagement and achievement (Roorda, Koomen, Spilt, & Oort, 2011). Research has shown that establishing and cultivating trusting relationships among school staff is essential to successful school improvement (Bryk & Schneider 2003). Focus group participants at Daingerfield JHS described a healthy and supportive school climate bolstered by several schoolwide practices, which include the following:

- Adult–student relationships and
- Trusting relationships among staff

This section includes data from the on-site interviews and focus groups that illustrate ways Daingerfield JHS staff have developed and maintain a positive school climate.

Adult–Student Relationships

Teachers interacting constructively with students is a schoolwide expectation at Daingerfield JHS. Therefore, teachers are dedicated to building affirming relationships with their students. One teacher described how he or she engages students: *“I constantly give pep talks.... That’s what I do. I’m always building self-motivation, self-discipline because I realize those are two important keys you have to have to be successful.”* Several other teachers described similar relationships with their students and emphasized

that the cultivation of adult–student relationships is essential to the school’s success. One teacher said staff make “a conscious effort to try to encourage the kids.... It’s never to the point of ‘I’m giving up on you. I’m done.’” The staff model resiliency and demonstrate a commitment to the lives of their students.

Beyond interactions with instructional staff and leadership, students at Daingerfield JHS have opportunities to build affirming relationships with adults from the greater community. Mentors from the Watchdog and BUDDYs program come in and work with assigned students, assisting them academically and socially. For example, during the site visit, one interviewee reported that the “BUDDYs group took some boys fishing on a Saturday,” giving the participating students an opportunity to share a positive experience with an adult outside of the school building.

Trusting Relationships Among Staff

Data collected during the Daingerfield JHS site visit reveal a sense of trust and collaboration among staff members. As one teacher stated, “It takes all of us working together in order for it to work.” Another focus group participant echoed this sentiment: “I think we try to deal with things in a positive, a good way, and try to deal with it in a way of we want your kids to be successful; that helps everybody. Helps the whole process. It’s just everybody pitching in and doing their part basically is what it boils down to. It cannot be done by just a few. It’s a whole group working together, most definitely.” The leaders have instilled this sense of trust and community by convening staff on a voluntary basis every morning for a time of reflection in which all staff think intentionally about their students and their hopes for the day. When interviewed, one participant said, “We strive for perfection to make sure that the children are covered, we really do. With the teachers I can say honestly that they are truly concerned about the children.” Focus group responses revealed that teachers do care deeply about their students and one another: “We go out of our way to take care of each other, too. We help each other.” This trust likely contributes to Daingerfield’s very low staff turnover—with many teachers having served in their positions for more than 10 years.

The data collected during the research team’s site visit indicate a schoolwide commitment to a healthy and supportive school climate through the cultivation of positive, affirming relationships. The staff focus on treating students with love and respect and recruiting adults from outside of the school to engage with the students positively. In addition, staff at Daingerfield JHS are dedicated to fostering positive relationships among instructional staff and emphasizing the importance of trust and accountability at the teacher level, making School Climate one of the most potent CSFs contributing to the school’s success.

Best Practice: Adult–Student Relationships

“I tell [students] with me, ‘You are important to me. You are valuable. You are worthy of me speaking to you, and you [can] see me about anything. I do not want you to feel uncomfortable because you are important. You are very important. I need you.’ They feel welcome.”

–Principal

Best Practice: Trusting Relationships

“We have great teachers. We have teachers who want to teach. We have teachers who have a lot of compassion for the student, but at the same time, we all set examples. We give respect, so we want it back, and our students see that, and they realize that, and they do. They do work hard, and we appreciate our students. We appreciate the parents. We appreciate everyone because we all just get along and make it work.”

–Teacher

District Support

In addition to the interviews and focus groups the team conducted with building staff and students, the research team interviewed a Daingerfield-Lone Star ISD staff member to learn about the relationship between Daingerfield JHS and the district. Daingerfield-Lone Star ISD is made up of two elementary schools, one junior high school, and one high school. In both 2014 and 2015, all schools in the district met state accountability standards.

Data from the March site visit indicate that Daingerfield-Lone Star ISD provides a variety of supports directly to Daingerfield JHS. Although the offered supports are many and varied, interview data suggest the district was particularly helpful in supporting the school's success in the following areas:

- Family and community engagement and
- General district support

This section includes qualitative data from the on-site interviews and focus groups. The data illustrate the ways Daingerfield-Lone Star ISD supports Daingerfield JHS's efforts to effectively lead a high-performing, high-needs school.

Family and Community Engagement

One of the most significant ways Daingerfield-Lone Star ISD supports Daingerfield JHS and other schools in the district is through engaging families and community members. The district staff member the research team interviewed at the district was enthusiastic about sharing Daingerfield JHS's success with the larger community: *"We take opportunities to celebrate big when we can. For instance, this reward school and high progress school, it's on our marquee out here.... It's been on there all year long. That was because a board member recommended it."* The district also leverages the school's relationship with the local paper to share school news, and over the course of the year there have been *"several good articles in the paper about [Daingerfield JHS's success]. I think this has been a really good shot in the arm for the junior high, I do."* Daingerfield-Lone Star ISD also hosts districtwide events that are open to the community. One Daingerfield JHS teacher described a Veteran's Day event in which *"each school [in the district] participated in some way. The elementary kids would sing, the older children would get up and maybe read an essay that they had written, and the local veterans came and were honored during that program."* Such events and recognition not only motivate Daingerfield JHS staff and students but also encourage community investment and participation in the school, including its mentorship programs.

Best Practice: District Support

"I have to rely on [the staff at Daingerfield JHS]. I do, because they're there every day.... They just have a real feel for the heartbeat of the school and know what the needs are."

–District Staff Member

In addition to generating enthusiasm for the school's success, the district assists in parent outreach. It is through the district that Daingerfield JHS receives translation services. The interpreter, though based at the local high school, provides translation of newsletters and consent forms and is on call for all meetings in which such services may be needed. The district also provides and connects students' families with wraparound services. For example, the district has an active School Help and Coordinated Services staff that coordinates monthly events and workshops on topics such as nutrition and child abuse prevention.

General District Support

Study participants described the various supports Daingerfield-Lone Star ISD offers teachers to improve instruction and help them pursue professional development opportunities. Campus and district leaders collaborate to determine what training staff may need. Teachers attend *“staff development days. It just depends on the training that we need at that given time.... We're able to meet departmentally during those days and then also as [a] grade level.”* Instructional staff are also encouraged to pursue professional development opportunities Region 8 ESC offers. The focus groups revealed a general perception of support from the district. For example, one teacher said, *“I've never been told that I can't attend the workshop.... They support us going to regional and attending the workshops.”* The school leadership echoed this sentiment, saying the district is willing to provide *“whatever we need. Our superintendent, our assistant superintendent—they are on hand. They're there.”* One interviewee said the district quickly processed a request for electronic dictionaries; another interviewee said district staff were responsive to needs related to the school's computer labs. In all cases, interviewed stakeholders were emphatic about the district's willingness to meet the school's needs.

Summary

According to interview and focus group participants, Daingerfield-Lone Star ISD provides the resources and supports the school needs to be successful. In addition to describing the district's dedication to developing strong community partnerships and engaging families, the Daingerfield JHS principal and teachers described the district's general commitment to supporting professional development and providing needed resources. This support from the district, along with strong family and community engagement practices and a commitment to cultivating positive relationships, contributes to the extraordinary achievements of Daingerfield-Lone Star Junior High School. The dedicated building staff and larger community have cultivated a unique culture of achievement and support, earning Daingerfield JHS the recognition of a Reward School.

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