



Vertical Teams Yield Vertical Achievement in Southeastern Texas School District

BY CRAIG HENDERSON

For principals, keeping track of what students and teachers in their own schools are up to is a full-time job. Rarely do they have a chance to learn about—and learn from—the doings of those in other schools.

In one Houston-area school district, however, principals as well as teachers relish the opportunity to collaborate with their counterparts across the street and across town. With its adoption of a vertical area team concept, Aldine Independent School District (Aldine ISD) has enabled educators at all the schools feeding a particular high school—pre-kindergarten, elementary, junior high, and ninth grade—not only to learn from each other but also to work together and with high school personnel in a systematic and continuous way to achieve common goals. At the top of the priority list is enhanced student performance and improved graduation rates.

LINKS IN A CHAIN

In many ways the district-within-a-district concept, incorporated during the 1994–95 school year, simply takes the school-within-a-school idea to a broader level. With 48 campuses in 1994, Aldine's leadership decided to divide the district into smaller chunks to better support principals and their schools. As part of the reorganization, the vertical team concept emerged and four area superintendents were named to head each new area.

The vertical areas, which now number five and encompass 64 campuses, are based on local feeder patterns; all those schools in the chain extending toward a particular high school make up one vertical area. It's a common-sense way to align the schools, creating consistency for students as they move from one school to the next and opening vital channels of communication among principals and teachers across all the schools in the chain.

A key component of the vertical area teams is the ongoing collaboration of principals. In the MacArthur High School vertical area, for example, principals from each school in the minidistrict meet every two weeks to plan, raise issues of concern, and share information.

"There's always been alignment in terms of planning, but there was nothing that prompted us to have these meetings that allow principals to work together, plan together, look at issues that might be of common concern to all the schools, and possibly use our resources more wisely," said Margarita Byrum, area superintendent.

Byrum explained that each vertical area is similarly structured and assumes the name of the high school residing at the top of the feeder chain. "It's a natural way for us to define the vertical [area]," she said. "We decided we needed to focus on the high school because it is the culmination—where the students end up and where they graduate from. So, in our case, everyone steers in the direction of ensuring that our children graduate from MacArthur High School."

A TEAM IN EVERY SENSE OF THE WORD

Stemming from Aldine Superintendent of Schools M. B. Donaldson's belief in teamwork and the support of the district's board of trustees, Aldine ISD's approach has teaming at its core. Various collaborative initiatives, including the biweekly meetings attended by principals and the area superintendent, have paid dividends in numerous ways.

For instance, not long after the districtwide approach was implemented, the MacArthur vertical area team identified the area's high dropout rate as a prime target for attention. Deemed unacceptable by team members, the 7.3 percent rate was addressed head-on. At the beginning of the 1994-95 school year, the principals fanned out across their district and began knocking on doors looking for children who had not returned to school following the summer break. Byrum remembers the results-yielding effort as the first "aggressive initiative" undertaken by the team as part of its focus on results at the high school level.

"We took a portion of the 250 or so students in our community who had, for whatever reason, not shown up for the first day of school," Byrum related. "We divided them up by elementary school [area], and we all took a set of kids. We started knocking on doors and asking 'Why aren't you in school?' and 'What's going on?' It showed that all of us have an investment in the high school, that we're all in this together."

The vertical area team's continued diligence in addressing the issue, which is discussed at each team meeting, has paid off. Over the past six years the 7.3

percent dropout rate has been slashed to 1.8 percent—a remarkable 75 percent reduction. Rose Avalos, principal at MacArthur High School, said the vertical area team has been largely responsible for stemming the flow of students, mostly ninth and 10th graders, leaving the school system prematurely.

"[Dropout reduction] is a vertical project," Avalos said. "We all share in the responsibility of recovering students. Every feeder school in our vertical area works on a set of students that we [the high school staff] pass to them, and we have gotten kids back in school as a result of that."

ACHIEVEMENT ACCELERATED

Reducing the dropout rate is only one of the accomplishments of the MacArthur vertical area team. Setting high student expectations and promoting accelerated instruction for all children—key elements of the team's strategy—seem to be working. A five-year performance summary of student assessment scores in core subjects reveals MacArthur vertical area schools have improved greatly since the vertical area structure was established. Improvement at the high school level has been especially dramatic. The percentage of students passing state examinations in reading, writing, and mathematics over the past five years has increased by an average of 26 percent (Figure 1).

Although MacArthur High School has shown steady growth in terms of student performance by state assessment standards, Byrum said the vertical area must forge ahead with its various programs to sustain growth at the high school and its feeder schools. One program takes direct aim at a pressing issue for Aldine ISD's MacArthur area students, 70 percent of whom are Hispanic. Project Success, a vocabulary development program in place at Worsham Elementary, is designed to help the numerous students who are not proficient in English get up to speed. With the school consistently passing nearly 100 percent of its students in state-mandated reading and writing assessments, the results speak for themselves.

Byrum points out that Worsham, with 800

STAFFBOX

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	READING % Passing—All Students						MATH % Passing—All Students						WRITING % Passing—All Students					
	'99	'98	'97	'96	'95	'94	'99	'98	'97	'96	'95	'94	'99	'98	'97	'96	'95	'94
MacArthur High School	89	84.9	82.6	72.7	71.4	64.5	82	74.7	66.7	56.1	48.1	43.9	88.6	85.1	87.3	80.4	86.1	73.8
District High Schools	86.1	82.7	81	76	71	70	80.3	75.2	69.4	56	53	46	88.1	85.7	85.6	80	84	76
State High Schools	88.8	87	84	82	76	76	81.6	78.4	72.6	66	60	57	90.6	87.4	85.3	86	86	81

Figure 1

students—about 80 percent of whom are considered economically disadvantaged—has served as a test bed for many of the vertical area's practices and programs. And for five straight years it has earned an exemplary rating from the state based on its students' performance.

"The programs that are in place at Worsham have helped the team plan," she said, noting that Project Success is just one of the major initiatives put forth there. "Another is Worsham's strong staff development program that focuses on ensuring teachers are well versed in differentiating instruction for children depending on their needs."

Recognizing early on the importance of teachers being focused on and trained in helping students become independent thinkers—moving beyond "the basic levels of thinking" and up the ladder to comprehension, application, analysis, and critical/creative thinking—the vertical area team has made staff development a mainstay item on its agenda.

STAFF DEVELOPMENT

A key to achieving vertical alignment among the schools has been the numerous staff development functions attended by teachers from across the MacArthur vertical area. One such function occurs one Saturday every other month. Attended by five or six staff members nominated from each area school, the staff development meetings are facilitated by consultants John Samara of Austin, Texas, and Jim Curry of Portland, Maine. Designed to help the teachers learn better approaches to differentiate teaching methods for students, create comprehensive units of instruction, and more, the meetings offer a way to enhance the 100-

plus educators' skills and diffuse improvement across the district.

"The concept has evolved, but we know that the ongoing staff development has been a key component to helping us with the vertical alignment," Byrum said. "And the successes we're experiencing in most of our schools will back that up. The results, you can see them."

In addition to the Saturday morning sessions are workweek evaluations of selected teachers by the external consultants, who tape vignettes of teachers in various situations for later study. The method enables the teacher as well as his or her colleagues to learn from the in-class experience and gain feedback from the experts. And because this is an areawide effort, a fourth-grade science teacher in a different school, for example, is just as likely to gain insights from the video vignette as fourth grade teachers in the building where the video was shot; the learning and sharing are not isolated to one school.

Coupled with the vertical area's staff development efforts, which include weekday and weekend training sessions for assistant principals, is implementation of a skill specialist concept districtwide that began several years ago at the elementary level and has since been expanded throughout the area. These skill specialists are teachers located in each school who serve as resources for fellow teachers.

"We wanted experts who are trainers, or master teachers, in math, reading, and writing who can facilitate instruction," Byrum said. "They provide day-to-day support for teachers."

A CONSISTENT APPROACH

According to Byrum, the areawide staff development efforts in addition to ongoing intradistrict interaction have led to consistency on several levels. Common terminology, teaching methods, learning environments, assessments, and expectations all create a sense of familiarity and understanding among teachers and students throughout the area schools. Additionally, she credits the vertical area's leadership modeling efforts and the shifting of teachers' focus from a subject orientation to a student orientation with the dramatic turnaround at MacArthur High School.

MacArthur principal Avalos agrees.

"One of the goals that I had for myself was to try to facilitate a different approach to teaching at the high school level because traditionally, high school teachers have felt they are married to their subject rather than masters at teaching," Avalos said.

Avalos has made a point of hiring teachers with elementary and middle school experience as a way to "open the eyes" of high school teachers to successful new strategies. She is hoping to "contaminate" [high school] teachers with interactive, hands-on methodologies, which have been successful at lower grade levels.

"They've also developed relationships with some of the elementary and junior high teachers by being involved in similar training, and I think that's good for both sides," Avalos said, noting that the areawide teacher interactions have made feeder school teachers more aware of expectations at the high school level. "Over a period of six years, our kids have improved their scores, and it's been a gradual growth. I think that's come from trying to build a strong instructional program."

FRUITS OF THEIR LABOR

Nothing is more encouraging for the vertical area team members than success stories and tales of student achievement. These stories are routinely shared during the roundtable discussion portion of the biweekly team meetings.

ALDINE INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Enrollment: 49,453 students

Ethnic Composition:

- Hispanic: 47.3 percent
- African-American: 35.7 percent
- White: 13.6 percent
- Asian: 3.3 percent
- Native American: 0.1 percent

Economically Disadvantaged: 70.5 percent

Students Qualifying for Free or Reduced Lunch:

- 70 percent

"Vertical teaming has given all of us a better perspective as to where the kids are going and where they're coming from with regard to their learning," said Avalos, pointing out that principals at the feeder schools are highly interested in the high school accomplishments of their former students. "It helps them to see how they have helped the kids get to this point. It's dispelled the feeling that we are all separate entities only responsible for the group of kids we have at a given time."

From announcements of student accomplishments to periodic listings of award winners, the vertical area team meetings enable educators across the district to take pride in the fruits of their labor, providing them an incentive to continue the fight to advance all students toward fulfilling academic careers and graduation from MacArthur High School.

"Without the vertical teaming, that wasn't happening," Avalos said. "It has truly enhanced the feeling that these are our students, not their students or my students. And the kids are benefiting from it." •