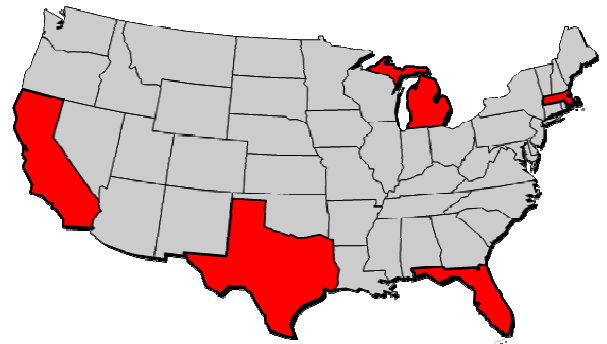




CASE STUDY

Core Practices in Math & Science: An Investigation of Consistently Higher Performing Schools in Five States

**Spring Oaks
Middle School**
Spring Branch
Independent School
District
(Texas)



Introduction

Since 1999, the National Center for Educational Achievement (NCEA) and its affiliated research teams have studied over 500 public schools across the country in an effort to identify and disseminate effective practices embraced by higher performing schools that distinguish their campuses from their average-performing peers. Building on the foundation established by this previous research, NCEA sought in the current study to focus specifically on educational practices in the areas of mathematics and science in five states: California, Florida, Massachusetts, Michigan, and Texas.

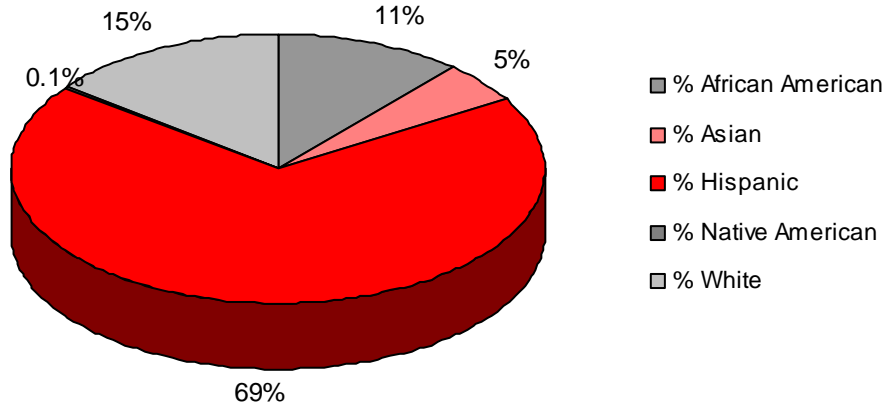
Criteria used in school selection in the current study included three years of state assessment data in mathematics and science (2004, 2005, and 2006), campus demographic make-up, percentage of economically disadvantaged students, school size, and geographic location. In addition, all of the schools selected for participation met the state and federal requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in 2006. Schools categorized as higher performing based on the selection criteria were those “beating the odds” with consistently better student achievement over three years, when compared to peer campuses with a similar student population. Therefore, a list of the state’s highest performing schools may contain schools different from those selected for this study.¹

In order to illuminate the roles of different members in a school community, for each selected school, NCEA researchers interviewed district-level administrators, school administrators, and classroom teachers. To supplement the interview data, researchers collected pertinent documents, observed secondary level algebra classes, and invited participants to take part in the NCEA *Self-Assessment* online.

¹ For more detailed information about the school identification process and the list of higher performing schools included in the study, please see the full cross-case report at <http://www.nc4ea.org>.

Figure 1: Student Demographics

Spring Oaks Middle School



District and School Profile

Spring Branch ISD is located in the northwest region of Houston, Texas. The district serves approximately 32,000 students, with more than 55% of those students qualifying for the free and reduced-price lunch program. Most of the students (53%) are Hispanic; 7% are African-American; 6% are Asian; and 33% are White. Thirty percent of students are English language learners. The district has 45 schools: 24 elementary schools, 9 middle schools, and 6 high schools. Two-thirds of the schools are considered Title I schools.

Spring Oaks Middle School (SOMS) serves approximately 810 students in grades 6 through 8, with more than 77% of those students qualifying for the free and reduced-price lunch program. Hispanic students comprise 70% of the population, 11% of students are African-American, 4% are Asian, and 14% are White. Eighteen percent of students are English language learners and the school has 16% of its students in individualized education programs for special education.

As a strong proponent of higher standards, NCEA recognizes school efforts to move more students to the state's higher standard of achievement by accounting for those students in the analysis of consistent higher performance. Tables 1 and 2 summarize performance at both the state's proficient and advanced standards attained by the students at Spring Oaks Middle School for the years of 2004, 2005, and 2006. The state averages included in the tables represent student performance among schools with a student population similar to Spring Oaks, particularly based on the percentage of economically disadvantaged students.

Table 1: Performance Trends based on Proficiency Standard

	2004			2005			2006		
Grade	6	7	8	6	7	8	6	7	8
Mathematics	83%	77%	76%	87%	78%	80%	89%	81%	84%
Science	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	46%
State Average for Similar Schools (Math)	50%	45%	42%	56%	49%	46%	66%	57%	53%
State Average for Similar Schools (Science)	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	34%

Table 2: Performance Trends based on Advanced Standard

	2004			2005			2006		
Grade	6	7	8	6	7	8	6	7	8
Mathematics	35%	35%	43%	44%	41%	37%	43%	38%	44%
Science	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	7%
State Average for Similar Schools (Math)	12%	14%	13%	17%	18%	14%	21%	23%	18%
State Average for Similar Schools (Science)	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	Not Tested	4%

Theme 1

Student Learning: Expectations & Goals

School and district leaders have focused, definable goals that build on each other, are measurable, and go beyond the state test (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, or TAKS).

- A district leader stated, “Know where you want to go, establish a definable goal, have the measures in place, and make sure your plans focus on that. Focus the system. Define an overall vision, and goal, and back your plans from that.
- Although educators carefully align the district curriculum to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) in preparation for the TAKS test, district and school leaders do not believe they are a “TAKS district.” A district leader stated, “The goal is not about passing TAKS; it’s really about our kids prepared for life when they leave us. While we still have a lot of work to do, our initiatives are focused and the teachers and principals know what they

are.” A school administrator adds, “For 4 years I’ve been preaching that we are going to do well on TAKS, our students will perform, but we’re much more than a TAKS school. Our fine arts are just as important as our academic performance, our kids being involved in athletics, sports, student council, and all the other things that round out a school.”

Teachers, under the guidance of district content directors, write and revise the district curriculum (including curricular materials, such as roadmaps and scope and sequence documents). Teachers at the school and classroom levels revise and customize the district curriculum to address their students’ needs.

- District leaders identify the best teachers, department chairpersons, and school improvement specialists and hire them to write the district curriculum every summer. The teachers/writers come from across the district and represent schools with various demographics, so they are able to address the different experiences and learning needs of the district’s students. During the school year, teachers who created the curriculum review it with other district teachers³/₄and may even interact with students in some math and science labs. If there are questions, teachers can contact any of curriculum developers at any time, for further clarification and understanding.
- On the school level, teachers continue to refine the curriculum for their students. An instructional specialist stated, “It’s a ground up effort coming from the people who are closest to the students, issues and things happening in the classroom that need to be addressed.” A school administrator added, “When we write curriculum we’re very mindful of...the TEKS that are tested the most and...the foundational TEKS that affect the others.”
- On each campus, teams of teachers spend a day refining the aligned curriculum roadmap before the school year begins, using the latest data from the TAKS. While they do not skip (or skimp) on any of the objectives, these teachers can determine the objectives to which they need to devote more³/₄or less³/₄time. A district administrator stated, “I don’t believe that there’s a one-size-fits-all curriculum. Different campuses have different needs. We want them to map those objectives out based on the needs of their students.”
- Classroom teachers further revise and refine the curriculum using students’ understanding as the main guide. One science teacher noted: “there are essential labs and activities, but depending on kids’ understanding you can add on or take away other activities. Another science teacher stated: “it’s at the discretion of the teacher if she wants to do something different, following the TEKS but not following the exact curriculum.”
- An instructional specialist stated, “There’s no rubber stamping here....We use our test scores; we’re very data driven, so we know where our strengths and weaknesses are, and where the holes are in curriculum, and where we need

to refine every year, and where we need to focus to map curriculum and instruction.”

The Curriculum Portal, the online curriculum available on the district’s intranet, allows teachers easy access to curricular materials. The Curriculum Portal shows each content-area curriculum and the objectives from the TEKS in a standard format, progressing from broad to very detailed.

- The curriculum developers have organized the objectives from the TEKS into four 9-week scope and sequence “quad sheets,” which show the objectives that must be taught in each 9-week period.
- The curriculum map provides more detail and outlines how instruction will progress over the course of the 9 weeks. Within the curriculum map are further details with lesson plans, model lessons, warm-ups, assessments, and activities that teachers can use for each objective.

Theme 2

Staff Selection, Leadership, & Capacity Building

Designing and Delivering Instruction (DDI) is one of the basic building blocks for the professional development in Spring Branch ISD.

- District leaders began DDI because they saw a need to lay a foundation for their long-range professional development plans. The purpose of DDI is to establish a baseline of lesson design for “good first teaching.” In DDI, teachers learn how to design lessons that ensure they are delivering effective instruction. A district leader stated, “It’s not enough just to know your content. If you can’t deliver the lesson in an effective manner, the kids are not going to get the concepts.” The training focuses both on how to state an objective and engage the students early in the lesson and on how to provide guided practice and input throughout the lesson to ensure that the students participate and remain engaged.
- In the last 3 years, the district has been pushing hard to get everyone through the 4-day training. Anyone in the district who falls under the curriculum and instruction division gets DDI training, including classroom teachers, instructional specialists, counselors, and principals. Others, such as special education and bilingual/ESL staff, are encouraged to take it as well. The training occurs in August before the school year begins for new teachers and takes place throughout the year for all other educators. Content directors^{3/4}as well as school improvement specialists and teachers trained by the content directors^{3/4}conduct the training. Using the train-the-trainer model allows each school to have a cadre of qualified educators as an on-campus resource for DDI.

The district has seen huge student achievement gains from focusing educators' professional development on questioning and literacy and writing strategies in math and science.

- In the last few years, district leaders have put a “very big emphasis” on questioning strategies that check for a higher level of understanding in math and science, ensuring students think critically. District leaders also make a huge effort to infuse literacy and writing strategies throughout the curriculum. This professional development emphasizes getting students to consume and critique literature and technical writing so that they understand exactly what the content is telling them and what they are being asked to do.
- The district builds on the academic gains resulting from training that teachers have already had. A district administrator stated, “We’re taking each of those to the second level. This August all of the math and science teachers will get part two of the questioning and writing strategies. We’ve learned something; now we’re going to take it to the next level.”

The Bilingual/ESL department works closely with content-area directors and school improvement specialists on campuses to ensure teachers use the best strategies for bilingual/ESL students. At every campus, a representative with bilingual/ESL expertise, leadership, and knowledge acts as a direct contact to the school’s ESL department for training requirements or anything the campus may need.

- District trainers incorporate bilingual/ESL strategies into mandatory professional development at the beginning of the school year. Trainers emphasize strategies that make the curriculum more accessible to bilingual/ESL students. Content-area teachers are responsible for ESL strategies and language. A district administrator stated: “The strategies and programs are integrated into the content areas, because that’s where it’s meaningful.”
- Each campus has a designated ESL liaison, whether it is a department chair on the middle and high school levels or a Title 3 specialist in an elementary school. For these educators, the district provides 2 full days of professional development focused only on instructional issues for ESL students, working specifically on their campuses’ linguistic needs. On the middle and high school levels, these designated staffers disseminate information through their own departments during content-area department meetings. A district administrator stated, “I think [ESL contact] is one of the most successful structures we have. Because we know who they are; any information we have we send it to them, they disseminate it through the campus.”

Principals meet monthly in Teaching and Learning meetings, which focus on instructional leadership.

- Principals’ Teaching and Learning meetings focus strongly on teaching and learning from a school leadership perspective. Principals meet in school-level

groups³/₄elementary, middle or high³/₄and bring topics to the table about the instructional issues and needs of their campuses. Topics include how to talk to teachers about their data in a non-threatening, helpful, and reflective way.

- District leaders bring in professional articles and books and may even have a teacher come in and model a strategy or lesson to familiarize principals with the best instructional practices and strategies for their students and make them better able to offer support where needed on their campuses. A district leader stated, “District leadership may frame the district-wide issues for the principals, but the dialogue³/₄around best practices and what that looks like in the classroom³/₄really happens among the principals.”
- Principals use the meetings to assess their campuses from an objective point of view and get support from colleagues in the same situations. A district administrator stated, “What we find most of all, they need time to reflect and to dialogue and discuss what’s happening on their campuses.”

Spring Branch ISD uses the train-the-trainer model for much of its professional development for teachers, and it has developed two unique support positions to do so: the school improvement specialist and the support team specialist.

- Every campus has two school improvement specialists: one for math and science, and one for language arts and social studies. The district has the resident school improvement specialists lead much of the staff development for teachers. Specialists also disseminate information, such as changes in curricular or material resources, directly to teachers. The school improvement specialists collaborate with campus principals, because school and district leaders understand that principals are instructional leaders first.
- Although school improvement specialists collaborate across campuses, the district assigns each to one campus, where he or she is a constant presence. School improvement specialists participate in department meetings and prepare lesson plans with teachers. They also go into classrooms and may teach lessons to students during class. Another major role for school improvement specialists is analyzing TAKS data. They meet with teachers to discuss the data and how it affects lesson planning and teaching strategies.
- Support team specialists comprise a core district-level team of highly successful teachers, not administrators. Support team specialists are staff developers and support people. These specialists differ from the school improvement specialists in that the district does not assign support team specialists to a single school. Additionally, support team specialists design and fulfill action plans that the district develops for struggling schools.
- The support team specialists work with struggling campuses in Spring Branch ISD (one support team specialist works mainly with teachers new to the

district). They are a coaching voice for the curriculum and instruction division, providing day-to-day services to teachers in a supportive, instructive way rather than in an evaluative way. However, they do not work with principals, as school improvement specialists do. They help write lessons, model lessons, help teachers reflect on student data, and attend team meetings. Every week, the support team specialists meet with district leaders to talk about schools and their progress.

Theme 3

Instructional Tools: Programs & Strategies

A Spring Oaks Middle School administrator stated, “We try to keep a distinction between what we stand for, which should never change, and how we do things, which should never stop changing. Learning is a core value; we expect all students to learn and demonstrate progress. We continually discuss ways of adjusting our teaching so that each student is successful.”

- Instructors at SOMS use a variety of methods and media to ensure students understand the content. Educators mix direct teaching with discovery and the use of various media to explain the content in different ways and to add repetition. This method gives students multiple opportunities to demonstrate understanding. A math teacher noted, “Any kind of pictorial representation of what we’re doing is good. Graphs, functions, any thing we can do visually or let them touch, was very helpful for us this year.”
- Math and science teachers focus on reading and writing strategies, questioning, and vocabulary as discussed in Theme 2. The majority of the problems on the math TAKS test are word problems; therefore, a math teacher asserted, “If they don’t understand the words, like ‘algebraic function’ or ‘triangular prism’, they’ll completely miss the problem.” Another teacher stated, “Reading strategies go with being able to vocalize and put all that vocabulary into a visual representation, put it all together before they even start working the problems.”

The foundation of the district’s best practice philosophy is that, to be successful, educators must meet the individual student at his or her own level.

- A district administrator stated, “We have a philosophy in our district: it’s not about programs or materials provided, but about the teachers themselves. The teacher is the main resource. You can give them lots of resources, which we do, but if you don’t develop the teacher and give the teacher the tools to really address the needs of the kids at the point where the child needs it, then the materials and resources are not going to be very helpful.”

- A school administrator stated, “We have great teachers; we have teachers who really are content experts. But teaching is not about content, teaching is understanding the individual needs of kids and where they are and how to meet those needs and change your instruction.”

SOMS educators understand the importance of college and career readiness and provide many opportunities to enroll students into pre-advanced-placement (AP) classes. They want to challenge as many students as possible to reach for higher goals, especially in math education.

- SOMS has an open system for their pre-AP classes, and the educators work hard to get as many students into those classes as possible. School administrators look closely at incoming 6th-grade students to determine whether to place them in pre-AP classes. Administrators even set up meetings with parents to explain the importance of getting their children into the pre-AP program.
- SOMS is flexible with its arrangements and grouping. After school starts, the school improvement specialist looks at TAKS scores and encourages any student who did well in math on TAKS to enter pre-AP classes. Sixth-grade teachers can also make recommendations if they see students excelling in math and believe they should be in the pre-AP program. This requires moving students individually to different classes and adjusting their schedules. An instructional specialist stated, “When we have large numbers we move into big [scheduling] problems [for the adults], but we have been known to create big problems just to accommodate those children. They deserve it.”

Throughout the district, staffers reinforce the practice of mainstreaming special education students and English language learners so that they have access to the main curriculum.

- Educators mainstream most English language learners and special education (SPED) students, and those students attend academic classes with accommodations to the curriculum. When students do need additional assistance, the school does not remove them from content classes. The emphasis is on knowing the individual needs of students. A district administrator stated, “The first thing you need to do is know your learner. It’s not enough to just know that the child is an English language learner.”
- Teachers also use peer tutoring, pairing ELL and SPED students with other, stronger students. Some classes have a co-teacher in the classroom every other day. However, that co-teacher is not exclusive to the special education students, and those students are neither isolated nor identified in any way to the other students. As one teacher put it, “the co-teacher helps everybody. They all need help.”

Theme 4

Monitoring: Compilation, Analysis, & Use of Data

Spring Branch ISD created a program called Academic Improvement, Monitoring, and Support (AIMS), which is a set of practices around the use of data.

- Several years ago the superintendent directed district and school leaders to capture effective practices at different schools and standardize them as district practices. AIMS is that set of practices built around ADM reports³the district's data reporting tool⁴for reflection, conferencing, instructional and intervention decision-making, department evaluation, and all the important elements that the district leaders believe make for strong performing schools and successful students.
- AIMS provides principals with a framework of practices and expectations that they are required to use. Classroom teachers, instructional specialists, and other school administrators have access to the data and use AIMS as well. A district administrator stated, "With AIMS, we try to create venues for discussions and provide guiding questions for teachers and team leaders to pepper the dialog, [so that they] understand the bridge between a page of numbers [and] making decisions. There isn't a district assessment that goes on on-campus that is not woven into the instruction."

Spring Branch ISD differentiates its benchmark system that so that high performing schools can opt out, though many choose to continue participating.

- Schools may opt out of participating in the district's benchmark assessments based on student performance by subject. A district administrator stated, "When we differentiated benchmarks, we saw our scores increase by giving the flexibility. We went against the grain with that. We implemented 3 years ago. When you make that decision, you worry, but scores have not gone down."
- High performing campuses can opt into taking the benchmark assessments, and many do. A district administrator stated, "Assessments are woven so thoroughly into instruction; that may contribute to the fact that when principals have the option to 'opt out' of district benchmarks they do not, because that's just a part of their practice now."

Benchmark assessments begin in grades before the first year of TAKS testing and are not "just an event on one day." When developing classroom instruction, teachers fully integrate data from benchmark assessments.

- A district administrator stated, "The challenge years ago, a dozen years ago when there was a primitive form of benchmarks, was making the benchmark a

tool of instruction not just an event on one day. I can tell you without any doubt in my mind that we are so far beyond that now. There isn't a district assessment that goes on at campuses, that teachers and principals are not brought to a discussion."

- District leaders start benchmark assessments before the initial TAKS year for each subject to assess whether they are on track for that subject. For example, educators administer the first math TAKS assessment in the third grade; however, the district gives an end-of-year assessment starting in the first grade. TAKS testing for science begins in fifth grade, but the district initiates assessments in second or third grade to monitor performance and program effectiveness. The district also gives an assessment for the science TAKS test at the end of sixth grade and mid-semester of seventh grade to make sure students are on track with the TEKS, even though students do not take the science TAKS in those years.
- A teacher noted, "[We're] always analyzing³/₄almost on a daily basis³/₄whether the students understood what we did the day before; we've got our tests and our quizzes, but more than that, the district directs us. We do benchmarks at least twice a year. From that we have specific data that drive the after-school tutorials in the spring, but also we make a big analysis grid paper, per class, and we can look question by question, objective by objective to see what we need to reinforce and go back and re-teach."

Evaluations for schools, principals, and teachers are on a tiered system that looks at growth over the year and the processes put in place to reach goals, more than any set data point.

- District administrators use the AIMS process to create a tiered system of schools. Tier 1 schools have had historically strong performance. Tier 3 schools are struggling schools (although these schools are not necessarily academically unacceptable or not making AYP, they may be at risk of becoming so). Tier 2 schools are divided into two sections: 2a schools, which used to be strong but changing elements have given rise to concern; and Tier 2b schools, which either have had a significant negative change in their status, or have moved up from Tier 3 status.
- The superintendent evaluates all 46 district principals annually. Although principals set numeric goals and state how they plan to achieve them, the emphasis of the evaluations is on growth over time, the processes established, and the staff development taken to achieve these goals. The district also surveys campuses and gathers feedback from students and staff.
- For teacher evaluations, district and school leaders look for good teaching. As a district administrator asserted, "Can you design a lesson well?' is much more important than 'Can you use the active board well?' All the bells and

whistles are no good if I don't know how to teach." Although principals use test data in the evaluation process for teachers, district leaders require principals to use classroom observation information as well. The district provides principals with the appraisal instruments that they use to go in and observe as well as with flip charts with the "look-fors" in each content area. A district administrator stated, "You can't expect the principal, especially at the middle and high school level, to go into a calculus classroom and to really know exactly what the content is... So we really make sure we train our principals so they know what they are looking for."

- A new teacher in Spring Branch ISD does not go through the same evaluation process as a veteran teacher. A district administrator stated, "We spend a lot of time talking with them, training them, finding what their needs are, supporting them, because so many teachers leave the profession so soon. It's an investment. We don't evaluate them on the same level."

Theme 5

Recognition, Intervention, & Adjustment

Educators at SOMS use a variety of intervention strategies based on individual student needs.

- At SOMS, academic counseling for at-risk students occurs every 3 to 6 weeks. Students who are failing or in danger of failing meet with the guidance counselor individually. During these sessions, students set goals for themselves, such as passing a course or submitting all of their homework. A school administrator stated, "We pull them in, which says to them 'you're special; someone is looking out for you.' Afterwards they seek you out; they keep track and want you to know that they met goals and are passing."
- At SOMS, the Homework Center is an hour-long, after-school program that meets twice a week. The Homework Center started 3 years ago when math teachers voluntarily decided to have one teacher open her classroom every day after school so kids could come and have a quiet place to do their homework. The concept worked well; students handed in completed homework much more often. However, some of the students who really needed to participate were not staying. To remedy the situation, this year the Homework Center became mandatory for students not turning in their homework, and teachers placed at-risk students in the program. Eventually, SOMS extended the program to cover all core subjects, not just math, with teachers from all of the core subject areas volunteering.
- Interventions are not just for students struggling to pass the TAKS or who lack basic skills. SOMS educators focus not solely on being a "TAKS school", but on working for every student. "We've had pre-AP interventions in the last two

years, some algebra interventions and some other things, trying to be...a little more of a well-rounded school,” asserted a school administrator.

The district has a pyramid of interventions for students who do not perform well.

- At the base of the district’s intervention pyramid is good first teaching. The next level of intervention is in-classroom support. Instead of pulling students out, they capture many students in a “push-in” support model. This model relies on strong professional development for teachers so they can recognize when students need help. It arms them with a “bag of tools” to catch at-risk students effectively and early. The third level may require in-class support or “pulling out” the student. However, educators try not to pull students out during the class in which they are struggling, nor do they pull students out of electives, which the student may really enjoy. District leaders believe both would be counterproductive. This teaching and learning may occur before school, after school, or during advisory periods. A district administrator stated, “Principals and teachers are very creative, and you’ll find a variety of different models; we don’t tie them to any one.”
- The district has offered intervention mini-conferences four times this year. The district invites any teacher who instructs an intervention class, and about 70 to 80 people have attended each time. The conference topics include best practices in intervention, along with what works, with which students it works, and where teachers have seen the most success. A district administrator stated, “We at central office don’t have all the answers...lots of our intervention teachers have great ideas that happen on campuses that we should be doing district-wide. We try to capture those ideas, and as we do, we hope to put them in the appropriate place in the intervention pyramid.”

The administrative and teaching staff use creative methods for getting kids into intervention classes, including Saturday school and after-school tutorials.

- After-school tutorials and Saturday school only work if students attend and educators know the needs of the students attending. A school administrator stated, “I don’t think we’re doing anything any different than anybody else. We may be doing less than most people.” The school offers incentives for students attending Saturday school. “Always start with pizza,” a school administrator advised with a laugh. The school offers prizes that students can win by attending. Students may only be coming in hopes of winning a gift, but they come—and they learn.
- School administrators schedule the students’ advisory period during the last 30 minutes of the day. When students are struggling, their teachers put them

in a tutorial at the end of the day; when the bell rings for dismissal, they do not leave, but stay for further instruction.

- One teacher asserts, “We will find kids. No problem going to the cafeteria telling them to bring their lunches with them. After school, you’re not leaving; we’ve got work to do. Persistence, consistency, holding them accountable, no excuses, failure is not an option. They know that. We demand it.”

Summary of Findings

Student Learning: Expectations & Goals

School and district leaders have focused, definable goals that build on each other, are measurable, and go beyond the state test (TAKS). Teachers, under the guidance of district content directors, write and revise the district curriculum (including curricular materials, such as roadmaps, and scope and sequence documents). Teachers at the school and classroom levels revise and customize the district curriculum to address their students’ needs. The Curriculum Portal, the online curriculum available on the district’s intranet, allows teachers easy access to curricular materials. The Curriculum Portal shows each content-area curriculum and the objectives from the TEKS in a standard format, progressing from broad to very detailed.

Staff Selection, Leadership, & Capacity Building

Spring Branch ISD has extensive, integrated professional development at the district and school levels. District and school leaders base staff selection (recruitment, hiring, and retention) on needs of the students. Capacity building in the form of collaboration on all levels is extensive and integrated throughout the system. Designing and Delivering Instruction (DDI) is one of the basic building blocks for professional development in Spring Branch ISD. The district has seen huge gains in math and science from focusing educators’ professional development on both questioning and literacy and writing strategies for math and science.

Instructional Tools: Programs & Strategies

The foundation of the district’s best-practice philosophy is that, to be successful, educators must meet the individual student at his or her own level. At SOMS, educators offer a variety of instructional methods and practices and constantly innovate and update their programs, practices, and arrangements depending on the individual academic needs of their students. SOMS educators understand the importance of college and career readiness and provide many opportunities to enroll students into pre-AP classes. They want to challenge as many students as

possible to reach for a higher goal, especially in math. Throughout the district, staffers reinforce the practice of mainstreaming special education students and English language learners so that they have access to the main curriculum.

Monitoring, Compilation, Analysis, & Use of Data

The district completely integrates compilation, analysis, and use of data into every aspect of teaching and learning. Spring Branch ISD created a program called Academic Improvement, Monitoring and Support (AIMS), which is a set of practices concerning the use of data. Spring Branch ISD has differentiated its benchmark system so that high performing schools can opt out. Benchmark assessments begin in grades before the first year of TAKS testing and are not “just an event on one day.” Teachers fully integrate data from benchmark assessments into their classroom instruction.

Recognition, Intervention, & Adjustment

Educators focus intervention programs and practices on student needs based on data from the classroom and school- and district-level assessments. The district has a pyramid of interventions for students who do not perform well. Educators at SOMS use a variety of intervention strategies that they determine based on individual student needs. The administrative and teaching staff use creative methods for getting kids into intervention classes, including Saturday school and after-school tutorials.



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