In-School Academies Program Evaluation

June 2024

Background

In-School Academies (ISAs) began in the 2022-23 school year to provide a unique learning environment for students identified as "off-track." One theoretical framework that explains why students do not complete high school posits that they are either "pushed," "pulled," or "fall out of" school. [1]

- **Pushed-out** students often have attendance and behavior issues and are removed from school as a consequence.
- **Pulled-out** students from school experience external factors that necessitate dropping out. For example, financial obligations, employment, family needs, childbirth, or illness.
- Students **fall out** of school when they have made inadequate academic progress, have fallen off track, and gradually disengage from school.

When we imagined how we could remove these barriers for our students, we envisioned a learning environment where they could be successful. Using a research-based framework, the concept of In-School Academies was imagined, taking into consideration that students' connection to their community was necessary and optimal for achieving success.

An implementation program evaluation was conducted in the spring of 2024 in collaboration with Gibson Consulting.

Evaluation Questions

1. What was the student experience like at ISAs?
2. What was the teacher experience like at ISAs?
3. What was the counselor experience like at ISAs?
4. What did school administrators think of ISAs?
5. How were ISAs implemented at different schools? What factors influenced the most student success?
6. How did FCS's ISA program compare with peer district programs?
7. Should the ISA program expand to more schools across the district?

Methodology and Data

Data collection efforts included all five ISAs and one alternative high school, Independence High School. The evaluation team collected data during site visits (i.e., interviews, focus groups, informal notes), student survey data, quantitative program data, and program documents.

Site visits were scheduled through principals of the home comprehensive high school and the principal's designated contact person. During site visits, the evaluation team interviewed the principal and counselor of the home comprehensive high school, the counselor of the ISA, and two ISA teachers. Additionally, a focus group of students was conducted at each site. Interviews and focus groups were each 45-60 minutes in length.

Students at all ISA programs and Independence High School were asked to complete a survey about their experience in the program and their perceptions of social-emotional health.[2]

Demographics (e.g., gender, race, ethnicity, socioeconomic status), number of applicants,

[1] Jordan, W. J., Lara, J., & McPartland, J. M. (1996)

[2] Adapted from Furlong, M. J., You, S., Renshaw, T. L., Smith, D. C., & O'Malley, M. D. (2014). *Preliminary Development and Validation of the Social and Emotional Health Survey for Secondary School Students*.

acceptance rate, startup documentation for ISA, staff rosters, grades, attendance, course completion rate, graduation, disciplinary incidents, and financial data were collected and analyzed.

Evaluation Findings

Comprehensive high school counselors and graduation coaches periodically monitored student progress, whereas ISA staff closely monitored student progress.

Monitoring students for on-time graduation begins in ninth grade at most FCS high schools. Counselors and graduation coaches track student progress, offering options like online credit recovery and extended-day programs for 9th and 10th grade students who are falling behind. 11th and 12th grade students who are off track but meet specific criteria (minimum credits, satisfactory attendance, no serious discipline issues) may apply to an ISA program.

- **Counselor Support:** ISA counselors play a vital role in addressing students' academic, social-emotional, and community challenges. They are described as "nurturing and taking care of the delicate, intense needs of the students."
- **Proximity Advantage:** ISA classrooms and counselor offices are typically adjacent, allowing for close monitoring of graduation plans and easy access to academic or personal consultation. This setup is seen as a key factor in program effectiveness.
- **Challenges:** In one ISA site where facilities were more spread out, staff reported that the physical layout hindered the program's success.

The system described above also alleviates pressure on home high school counselors, who often manage 450-500 students, by redirecting the most at-risk students to ISAs, enabling a better focus on other students with lesser support needs.

Most ISAs provided their students with intense, individualized support.

The ISA program provides a supportive and personalized learning environment for students. Teachers take on a significant workload, managing up to 16 courses per semester while also providing one-on-one and small-group support. Students praised their dedication, with 92% agreeing that teachers actively monitored progress and 87% saying teachers helped when they struggled. Many students noted the emotional and academic encouragement from teachers, describing them as committed and approachable.

Counselors play a vital role as the backbone of the ISA program. They develop and track individualized graduation plans, manage course transitions, and provide daily academic and emotional support. They also connect students with external services, such as mental health support and college preparation resources. Students highly value their involvement, with 86% agreeing they meet regularly and 80% feeling comfortable discussing personal issues.

The ISA environment is tailored to student needs, supporting a maximum of 50 students per site. Classrooms range from structured to flexible, with some offering relaxed seating and peer interaction. This framework, combined with strong teacher and counselor support, creates a nurturing space where students can focus on credit recovery and graduation goals. Overall, the program's tailored approach and commitment to student success stand out as key strengths.

> "My plans after graduation are to go to college and get a bachelor's degree so I can be an anesthesiologist. Since I'll have a stable income, I'll start up my own business and make more money. Before this program, I was just going to work a 9-5 and make money to gain progress with my business, but the adults in this program talked to me about people they know and things I can do to have a good career, like me being an anesthesiologist. Someone talked to me about college, and now I am very interested in the medical field." –ISA Student

Several ISAs made it a priority to connect schoolwork with college and career success.

Students in the ISA program frequently discussed how teachers and counselors helped them focus on real-world experiences and post-graduation plans. Through activities like daily discussions, vision boards, and college applications, students were encouraged to think critically about their futures. One counselor emphasized the importance of planning for life after graduation, often asking students, “What happens after May?” This proactive approach led students to apply for colleges, attend field trips, and explore career paths they previously hadn’t considered.

Many students shared how the program transformed their outlook on life after high school. Some gained the confidence to pursue higher education or vocational training, while others discovered new career paths. For example, students transitioned from plans to join the military or work traditional jobs to considering four-year colleges, trade schools, and professional careers. A common sentiment was that the ISA program "opened their eyes" to opportunities they hadn’t realized were possible.

The ISA's commitment to inclusiveness also played a role in shaping students’ ambitions. Opportunities like college tours, ASVAB (Armed Services Vocational Aptitude Battery) testing, and career fairs ensured students had the same options as their peers in traditional schools. These efforts helped students not only catch up academically but also gain the confidence to pursue ambitious goals. Student survey results reflected this, with 64% of students agreeing that the program had changed their post-high school plans. Overall, the ISA program empowered students to envision and work toward brighter futures.

Action Steps

The evaluation highlighted several areas which are being addressed with the following actions.

- Monitoring student outcomes consistently throughout the semester and school year was reported to be a challenge. We believe this is due to the ever-changing student enrollment in the ISA programs. In order to assist ISA program staff, school leaders, and district administrators with more accurate and efficient monitoring of student outcomes, we are creating a data dashboard tool that will enable them to do so in real time.
- Connections to college and career options are important for all of our students, especially for students being served in our ISA program, so they have a clear path forward and a plan set for after they graduate high school. It was reported that college and career support sometimes vary across ISA programs based on the needs of their unique students. However, we acknowledge the importance of offering support and exposure to college and career opportunities. *ISA staff have already expanded* connections to college and career options by providing advisement lessons in Naviance and taking students on trips to college fairs and college campuses.
- Each ISA program aims for a smaller personalized community. As a result, each ISA customizes its program to create that unique learning environment. Some examples of this are program norms, personalized program names, and unique cords for graduates.

Staff will continue to analyze data to determine where and when to expand ISAs across the district.