

Evaluation of Academic Competitions: 2015-2016

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At-a-Glance

Student Activities Department staff facilitated a variety of academic competitions for students in grades two through twelve during the 2015-16 school year. Student Activities staff organized, conducted, and monitored each academic competition and also provided competition coaches with training, support, and resources.

Program Description

The Student Activities Department mission for the academic competitions was to build student knowledge and character. Goals included increasing academic competition participation, improving student achievement, helping students become critical thinkers, and encouraging team collaboration. The academic competitions complemented the academic curriculum in Dallas ISD schools and aligned with Goal 6 of the 2015-16 Dallas ISD Board Goals.¹

Methodology

The evaluator evaluated all academic competitions offered during the 2015-16 school year, which included: Lone Star Challenge, Academic Pentathlon, Academic Decathlon, Elementary University Interscholastic League (UIL), Middle School UIL, High School UIL, UIL Cross-Examination (CX) Debate, Texas Math and Science Coaches Association (TMSCA), Destination Imagination (DI), Middle School Dallas Urban Debate Alliance (DUDA), High School DUDA, Chess, and Robotics.

The evaluator surveyed coaches about training and support received, the amount of practice and preparation, the impact of the competitions on students, and the successes and obstacles they experienced while coaching. The evaluator surveyed students on practice and preparation, benefits, drawbacks, and overall satisfaction regarding the competition as well as the reasons they participated. The evaluation also included interviews and informal communication with Student Activities staff members.

Program Activities and Implementation

According to Student Activities staff, students at approximately 90 percent of all Dallas ISD secondary schools and 75 percent of all elementary schools

participated in at least one academic competition sponsored by Student Activities. During the 2015-16 school year, participation for individual competitions ranged from 18 to 89 schools and from 346 to 1,310 students. One of the goals for the Student Activities Department was to increase participation in academic competitions. Between the 2014-15 and 2015-16 school years, student participation increased for every competition and school participation increased for all but one competition.² Table 1 presents the competition participation for 2015-16. A three-year comparison can be found in the full report.

Table 1: 2015-16 Academic Competition Participation

Competition	Schools (N)	Students (N)
Academic Decathlon	25	416
Academic Pentathlon	18	398
Lone Star Challenge	53	636
High School UIL	25	587
Middle School UIL	23	1,267
Elementary UIL	55	1,310
TMSCA	73	832
Destination Imagination	83	1,141
High School DUDA	29	594
Middle School DUDA	20	346
Chess	83	1,250
Robotics	89	1,107

Source: Data were extracted from Student Activities internal records.

In 2015-16, Student Activities staff made three new competitions available to Dallas ISD students. One of these competitions was TMSCA. Originally, a few schools participated in TMSCA events on their own initiative and funds; Student Activities staff greatly increased participation by organizing involvement for the whole district. Competitive chess was introduced as a new academic competition opportunity in 2015-16 and had high participation for the first year. Student Activities staff piloted three competitive robotic programs in 2014-15 before expanding the programs districtwide during the 2015-16 school year.

Coach respondents were positive about the support they received from their principal, other campus administrators, and teachers. Most felt they received adequate resources and enough communication to feel prepared. More than half of coach respondents

¹ Board Goal 6 states, "All students will participate in at least one extracurricular or co-curricular activity each year." <http://www.dallasisd.org/visionandbeliefs>.

² School participation declined by two schools for High School DUDA; however, student participation still increased by 178 students.

attended training offered by the Student Activities Department (63%). Of those attendees, between 78 and 93 percent felt the training was relevant, high quality, well-organized, and adequate; however, fewer new coaches attended training or were informed about available training compared to more experienced coaches.

One of the most commonly reported obstacles for coaches was arranging practice around students' other activities or the bus schedule. However, a large majority of coach respondents reported meeting with their teams at least once a week (89%), and only six respondents never met with their teams at all (2%). Almost all student respondents reported meeting with their team or coach at least once a week (91%).

According to many coach respondents, students improved in self-esteem (92%) and perseverance (89%) due to participation in academic competitions. At least 85 percent of coach respondents also reported that students improved their cognitive skills, such as problem solving (85%) and creative thinking (85%), and social skills, such as collaboration (85%).

When asked about the successes of the competitions, one of the most prevalent themes was student engagement; respondents mentioned that many students who were not engaged in school were motivated to learn for the competition or became interested in new topics because of the competition. Coach respondents also noticed improvement in student persistence and confidence, often because students were being recognized as scholars and representing their schools.

More than 90 percent of student respondents felt motivated to participate in academic competitions for a fun experience (94%) or for the challenge (94%). This was echoed in the open-ended survey questions, where students indicated that being competitive and challenged was one of the best parts of the competition. Fewer, but more than half, of student respondents cited parent encouragement (66%) or teacher recommendation (72%) as a reason for participation.

The most widespread benefit of the competitions, according to student respondents, was that the competition allowed them to be academically recognized (90%) or raised their self-esteem (85%). Less than 30 percent of student respondents felt that the competition was too much of a burden or created excessive stress.

Overall, both coach and student respondents were very positive about their overall experience. More than 90 percent of coach respondents enjoyed coaching, wanted to coach again, and would recommend coaching to their colleagues. More than 89 percent of

students said they enjoyed participating in the competition, would compete again, and would encourage their peers to participate.

Recommendations

The evaluator strongly recommends that Student Activities staff construct and maintain a registration database, which would allow for evaluation of participants' academic achievement and attendance between the fall and spring semesters. A database has been in the process of being built since the 2013-14 school year, but was not ready for use in the 2014-15 or 2015-16 school years.

Student Activities staff offered more training during the 2015-16 school year than in the 2014-15 school year. However, according to new coaches, the availability of training was not always communicated clearly and the training was more appropriate for experienced coaches. The evaluator recommends either tailoring training to meet the needs of both experienced and new coaches or offering tiered training. Improving communication, especially for new coaches who may be unaware of informal information channels, would also help increase the number of coaches attending training.

Recommendations to improve future evaluation include improving survey administration for students. During the 2014-15 school year, students had to take paper surveys because computer labs were not guaranteed at the competition events and the wireless internet prevented students from using their mobile devices. The format of the survey also made it difficult to fit on a scantron, requiring the evaluator to enter data from the surveys by hand. In 2015-16, the evaluator requested that coaches administer or forward the survey to students in an effort to reduce the complications of paper surveys. However, many students either did not have email or did not have a class period with their coaches. Therefore, finding a new way to administer the survey to students would be ideal.

The full 2015-16 Academic Competitions report can be found at <http://www.dallasisd.org/Page/888>. For more information, contact Program Evaluation at 972-925-6457.