

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Achieving in the Middle (AIM) initiative was launched in the 2019-20 school year by the School Leadership department. The AIM initiative provided support to middle school students through five core components: strategic staffing; instructional excellence; a positive, responsive culture; enrichment opportunities; and supportive partnerships. This evaluation focused on the first three components. The budget for the AIM initiative in 2019-20 was \$10,084,036. The purpose of this report was to summarize the 2019-20 context, process, and outcomes of the Dallas Independent School District (ISD) AIM initiative.¹ Contextual information about the AIM initiative was gathered through review of internal documents and interviews with School Leadership department central staff members. Process information was examined through interviews with AIM initiative staff members, meeting observations, and surveys. Outcomes included fall attendance and *Assessments of Course Performance (ACP)* data. The report would typically examine spring outcome data, however, the Dallas ISD transitioned to at-home learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic beginning March 23, 2020 (after spring break). As most end-of-year assessments were canceled, segments of evaluation questions relating to those assessments were omitted from the report.² After the transition to at-home learning, the department continued to support district families, and ILTs and PLCs continued to support the teachers they served.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS/OUTCOMES

What was the context of the AIM initiative in 2019-20?

Methodology

Information about the context of the AIM initiative was gathered from the March 7, 2019 board briefing presentation, interviews with AIM central staff members and the EOD program director, meeting documents, and PD observations.

Results

Twenty-three middle schools were included in the AIM initiative in 2019-20. To implement the strategic staffing component of AIM, the School Leadership department implemented a Distributed Leadership Model (DLM). The

DLM included two components: segmenting physical spaces and providing additional staff. Staffing included additional Assistant Principals (APs) and counselors at each campus (one AP and counselor per grade level) and added core content Instructional Lead Teachers (ILTs). As of January 2020, School Leadership hired 21 APs, 22 counselors, and 76 ILTs to supplement existing staffing for the DLM. The additional staffing allowed for the creation of Content Leadership Teams (CLTs), consisting of APs and ILTs. CLTs helped teachers determine where to focus their instruction.

To foster instructional excellence, students were provided with opportunities for additional tutoring while campus staff members were provided with professional development (PD) and other supports. All campus leadership staff members participated in PD about the fundamentals of the DLM, techniques and routines for a positive and responsive culture, and the AIM techniques and skills for content instruction (the Get Better Faster 90-Day Program for teachers; Bambrick-Santoyo, 2016). ILTs also received additional monthly training that they then relayed to the teachers they served. Teachers were also supported through direct ILT coaching (observation and feedback cycles) and grade and/or content level Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) organized by CLTs. CLTs trained teachers in PLCs using Look Forward and Look Back Weekly Data Meetings (WDMs) that aligned instruction with Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) standards and helped teachers identify gaps in student knowledge and then determine clear action steps to address those gaps.

To foster a positive, responsive culture, campus staff members were provided PD which focused on schoolwide systems and structures, a joyful environment, restorative practices and social and emotional learning (SEL). Systems and structures training included practices to structure each segment of a student's day with a routine (e.g., arrival, dismissal, lunch, transitions, and celebrations), and to structure physical environments through classroom organization techniques (e.g., seating charts). These routines and organizational strategies were bolstered by staff communicating clear expectations to promote good behavior. Campus staff members received PD about encouraging a joyful environment (e.g., narrating positive behavior and displaying student work) and modeling positive relationships with adults and students. Finally,

¹ Some methodologies are provided here, but more details are available in the full report.

² *State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR)* and spring *Measures of Academic Progress (MAP)* and ACPs were intended to be

used as measures of student achievement for the 2019-20 school year, but these end-of-year assessments were canceled after the transition to at-home learning.

teachers were taught to use SEL techniques including welcoming rituals, restorative circles, and brain breaks.

What were the AIM student characteristics?

Methodology

To determine AIM student characteristics, the evaluator analyzed Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) data.³

Results

Of the 18,688 2019-20 AIM students, over half were male (56%), and most were either Hispanic (69%) or African American (26%) and economically disadvantaged (93%). Also, over half of the AIM students were English learners (51%), and 13 percent were enrolled in special education.

How was the ILT component of AIM implemented during the first year of the initiative?

Methodology

To examine implementation of the ILT component of the AIM initiative, the evaluator interviewed AIM central staff members, reviewed documentation from the summer kickoff and observed and/or reviewed documentation from the monthly ILT PD meetings. The evaluator also requested information from AIM leadership staff members about changes due to the switch to at-home learning.

Results

School Leadership sought teachers with a Teacher Excellence Initiative rating of Proficient I or higher to apply to ILT positions. Most ILTs taught one to two class periods per day and spent the rest of their time preparing for meetings with their PLCs and coaching the two to eleven teachers assigned to them according to content area (and in most cases, grade level). ILTs worked closely with APs and in some cases, CICs, to ensure lessons aligned with Texas Education Agency guidelines and the Board of Trustees' policies. ILTs also worked with their PLC CLTs to collaborate on teacher support plans and coaching schedules.

To transition teachers into ILT roles, School Leadership central staff members delivered PD sessions to ILTs (the campus leadership PD and monthly trainings mentioned in the context section).⁴ After receiving PD, ILTs provided the PD to their teachers and used this information to coach teachers in various techniques and skills in PLC meetings as well as one-on-one classroom observation and feedback cycles.

After the switch to at-home learning in March 2020 due to COVID-19, Network Coordinators oversaw virtual ILT PD on topics including topics such as technology talk, how to implement lessons virtually, best practices for using

at-home tools, and other content-specific topics. ILTs continued individual and campus-level coaching via Zoom meetings where they provided feedback on modeling videos and lesson activities. ILTs also visited their teachers' Zoom sessions with students and provided coaching "in-the-moment" and co-teaching.

What were the perceptions of the ILTs and teachers served by the ILTs?

Methodology

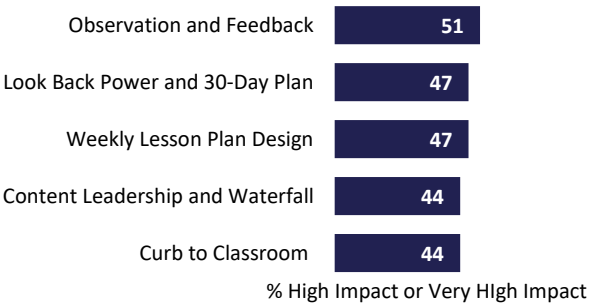
To understand ILT perceptions of the AIM initiative and teacher perceptions of the ILTs that supported them, the evaluator developed two surveys in partnership with AIM central staff members. The surveys were administered during the spring 2020 semester using emails with a survey link along with follow-up reminders. Frequency and descriptive analyses were conducted for rating-scale items on the surveys. Content analyses were conducted to examine the open-ended items. Responses were categorized into themes and tabulated. Some open-ended responses included information that fit into more than one theme.

Results

AIM ILT Survey

Of the 76 ILTs who were sent a survey, 60 responded (79%). ILTs most commonly served between one to five teachers (58%) and met with the teachers they served daily (80%). A sizeable proportion of ILTs rated all PDs as "high impact" or "very high impact" (44% to 51%; Figure 1).

Figure 1: 2019-20 AIM ILT Survey Responses About Perceptions of Professional Development



Source: AIM ILT survey administered spring 2020.
Note: Ns are available in Appendix D of the full report. N/A responses were excluded.

Overall satisfaction with PD was higher than impact ratings. Over 74 percent of ILTs reported being satisfied (either "satisfied" or "very satisfied") with the quality of the PD, collaboration with school administrators, and the quality of feedback and support they received from the CLT. Open-ended success responses (N = 43) indicated successes were development of effective instructional

³ The PEIMS data file was dated 10/31/19.

⁴ A list of specific topics covered in each monthly PD is available in the full report.

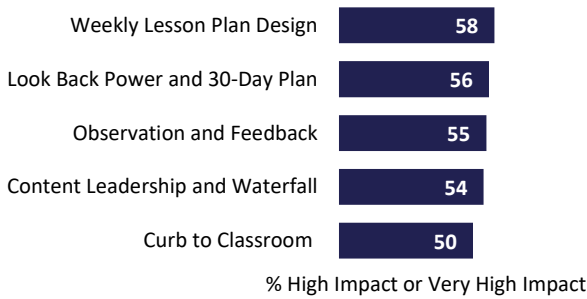
strategies and content delivery (*n* = 14), collaboration and discussion (*n* = 10), and teacher growth (*n* = 9). Challenges reported (*N* = 44) were time limitations (*n* = 12), balancing teaching and ILT duties (*n* = 9), and the workload assigned to ILTs (*n* = 8).

AIM ILT Teacher Survey

Teacher surveys were sent to 1,164 active email addresses; however, there were 464 teachers reportedly served by ILTs. After removing invalid emails and those who marked that they were not served by an ILT, 318 were included in the analyses (69% response rate).

Teachers most commonly reported meeting with their ILTs every day (42%). When asked about the impact of the PD provided by ILTs, about half of teachers reported all PDs had a “high impact” or “very high impact” on their success for the academic year (50% to 58%; Figure 2).

Figure 2: 2019-20 AIM ILT Teacher Survey Perceptions of Professional Development



Source: 2019-20 AIM ILT teacher survey administered spring 2020.
Note: Ns are available in Appendix E of the full report. N/A responses were excluded.

When asked about their overall satisfaction with the ILT component of AIM, many teachers reported being “satisfied” or “very satisfied” with the collaboration with school administrators (73%), feedback and support from ILTs (69%), and the quality of PD (68%). Teachers most commonly reported their ILTs providing them with PLC support (87%), working with campus administration on instructional practices (68%), and assistance with implementation of district curriculum (63%). When asked about the quality of ILT supports, many teachers “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that ILTs knew or found answers to questions (78%), presented suggestions positively (77%), and fostered a relationship that enhanced their teaching (70%).

Open-ended success responses (*N* = 210) indicated that the most common successes were observation and feedback cycles (*n* = 44), collaboration between ILTs and teachers in PLCs and the support network PLCs provided teachers (*n* = 39), and making engaging lessons/lesson

planning (*n* = 25). Challenges (*N* = 205) included time constraints of teachers and ILTs (*n* = 11), ILTs not fulfilling the duties of the role (*n* = 10), not enough observation/coaching from ILTs (*n* = 9), and too many meetings/meetings were too long (*n* = 9). When asked about the changes in the ILT-teacher relationship after the switch to at-home learning (*N* = 273), teachers most frequently reported that there were no changes (*n* = 131).⁵ However, the most frequently reported changes were less frequent ILT-teacher meetings (*n* = 34), a decline in the quality of interpersonal communication between ILTs and teachers (*n* = 17), and a change in communication medium between ILTs and teachers (*n* = 13).

How satisfied were the teachers with the Education Opens Doors curriculum?

Methodology

To understand teachers’ perceptions of the EOD curriculum (designed to support college, career, and military readiness),⁶ the evaluator received data from an EOD customer service survey distributed to teachers implementing the EOD curriculum. The survey was designed by the Dallas ISD School Leadership Assistant Superintendent, the EOD Director of Programs, and the EOD Data Manager. Only the teachers who selected an AIM campus as their place of employment were included in these analyses. The survey was administered during a four-week window from mid-February through mid-March 2020 through an email with a survey link along with weekly follow-up reminders. Frequency and descriptive analyses were conducted for rating-scale items on the surveys.

Results

Twenty-nine teachers across AIM campuses implemented the EOD curriculum. The response rate for AIM EOD teachers was 45 percent. Teachers most commonly reported teaching EOD curriculum five to six class periods per week (46%) to an average of either 16 to 20 or 31 or more students per EOD class (31%, for both). All respondents “strongly agreed” that they felt accountable implementing the EOD curriculum, were comfortable asking for support, and were satisfied with the support provided by Impact Managers.⁷ Most (92%) of teachers reported having positive relationships with their Impact Managers. Overall, 54 percent of teachers reported being “greatly satisfied” with the EOD program. More teachers were satisfied with in-person coaching and support (100%) and email/phone support (92%) than with technology support (62%). When asked about the perceived impact of implementing the EOD curriculum, 92 percent of teachers reported student engagement “somewhat improved” or “greatly improved” and 77 percent reported improved job satisfaction and relationships with students (62%). Eighty-five percent of

⁵ A response to this question was required while the questions about successes and challenges did not require a response; thus, the number of responses differ.
⁶ For more information on Education Opens Doors, see <https://educationopensdoors.org/>.

⁷ EOD’s Impact Managers provide training and support to teachers who implement the EOD program including classroom observations, coaching and consultation.

teachers responded that they would use the EOD curriculum next year and 92 percent said that they would recommend EOD to other educators.

What were the student attendance rates for AIM campuses?

Methodology

The evaluator analyzed AIM school student attendance rates for the fall 2019 semester. First, the evaluator calculated the number of days attended out of the number of days enrolled. Next, frequency analyses were conducted. Results from fall 2018 were also examined to provide a pre-program comparison.⁸

Results

In fall 2019, the overall attendance rate for AIM students was 95.4 percent. This was comparable to the fall 2018 attendance rate (95.3%).

Did AIM students score at or above ACP standards?

Methodology

To measure AIM student academic performance, the evaluator merged PEIMS demographic data files with fall ACP data files for the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years.⁹ The evaluator conducted a frequency analysis of ACP reading and mathematics scale scores of 70 or higher (passing rates) for AIM students. For comparison purposes, the evaluator also examined fall 2018 passing rates and calculated one-year change rates in percentage points.¹⁰

Results

Between 35 to 72 percent of AIM students passed (a scale score of 70 or higher) the reading ACPs and between 44 to 91 percent passed the mathematics ACPs in 2019-20. From 2018-19 to 2019-20, student ACP passing rates generally decreased in reading (9 of 12 assessments) and mathematics (4 of 7 assessments) at AIM campuses with some exceptions.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Continue use of the ILT model to support teachers. Most survey respondents “agreed” or “strongly agreed” that ILTs provided them with quality support.

Clearly define the ILT role and specific expectations assigned to the role. Of the 60 ILT survey respondents, some reported that they had difficulty balancing their ILT duties with other duties assigned to them ($n = 9$) and that the workload assigned to ILTs was too heavy ($n = 8$). Considering some teachers also reported ILTs not fulfilling their duties ($n = 10$), a clear definition of the ILT role as well as specific expectations considering the number of teachers assigned to the ILT and ILT teaching loads should be provided to staff members at the beginning of each school year.

Determine the optimal range for the ILT-to-teacher ratio. There was a wide range of ILT-to-teacher ratios across AIM campuses (2 to 11 teachers per ILT). A large ILT-to-teacher ratio may negatively impact the quality of support provided by the ILT and potentially impact student outcomes.

Refine the AIM PD according to ILT and teacher needs. Some PD sessions were more often rated as impactful by ILTs and teachers than others. AIM leaders should identify why ILTs and teachers perceived certain PD sessions as being more impactful or not and tailor the PD sessions accordingly.

REFERENCES

Bambrick-Santoyo, P. (2016). *Get better faster: A 90-day plan for coaching new teachers*. John Wiley & Sons.

Jimenez, K. (2018). *2017-18 Assessment of Course Performance (ACP)*. Dallas, TX. Dallas Independent School District.

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⁸ PEIMS data files dated 03/08/19 (2018-19) and 10/31/19 (2019-20). Fall attendance data files dated 05/07/19 (2018-19) and 01/24/20 (2019-20).

⁹ PEIMS data files dated 03/08/19 (2018-19) and 10/31/19 (2019-20). District student fall ACP files dated 07/22/19 (2018-19) and 02/20/20 (2019-20). For more information on ACPs, see Jimenez, 2018.

¹⁰ Because ACP exams are scaled each year based upon the current year's results, readers should exercise caution when comparing year-to-year results. One-year passing rate comparisons are provided for informational purposes only; percentage point changes included in full report.