

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Achieving in the Middle (AIM) initiative was launched in the 2019-20 school year by the School Leadership Department. In 2020-21, the AIM initiative continued to implement five core components to support 17,822 middle school students at 23 middle school campuses; however, AIM core components shifted slightly from 2019-20. They included recruitment and retention of high-quality leaders (formally strategic staffing); strategic instructional practice (formally instructional excellence); a transformative, positive culture (formally a positive, responsive culture); enrichment opportunities; and supportive partnerships. This evaluation focused predominantly on the first three components. The budget for the AIM initiative in 2020-21 was \$10,426,379, an increase from \$10,084,036 in 2019-20.

The purpose of this report was to summarize the 2020-21 context, process, and outcomes of the Dallas Independent School District (ISD) AIM initiative.^{1,2} 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 and assistant principal (AP), counselor, and Instructional Lead Teacher (ILT) surveys. Outcome data included the districtwide Campus Climate Survey, *Measures of Academic Progress Growth (MAP)*, and *State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR)* data.

On March 13, 2020, in alignment with federal recommendations, the Governor of Texas issued a disaster proclamation certifying that the novel coronavirus COVID-19 posed an imminent threat of disaster for all counties in the state of Texas. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, Dallas ISD transitioned students to at-home learning on March 23 following spring break (March 16 – 20) until the end of the 2019-20 school year. The start of the 2020-21 school year was delayed until September 8, 2020; at-home learning was implemented districtwide for the first four weeks. On October 22, 2020, the district announced that campuses would provide in-person and virtual learning throughout the rest of the school year, and parents could choose whether their children participated in in-person or virtual instruction.³

¹ Portions for this report are modified from Tyree (2020).

² Detailed methodologies are available in the full report.

³ More detailed information about changes due to COVID-19 is available in the full report.

EVALUATION QUESTIONS/OUTCOMES

What were the AIM student characteristics?

A total of 17,822 grade-six to grade-eight students were involved in AIM during 2020-21. Over half were male (56%), Hispanic/Latino (69%), and/or economically disadvantaged (92%). Over half of students were English Learners (51%), and 14 percent were enrolled in special education.

What was the context of the AIM initiative in 2020-21?

Twenty-three middle schools were included in the AIM initiative in 2020-21. To implement the recruitment and retention of high-quality leaders component of AIM, the School Leadership Department implemented a Distributed Leadership Model (DLM) beginning in 2019-20. The DLM separated physical spaces and provided additional staff members including up to three APs and counselors per campus and added ILTs to coach and support other teachers in core content areas. As of November 2020, there were 21 APs, 21 counselors, and 78 ILTs. The additional staffing allowed for the continuation of Content Leadership Teams (CLTs), consisting of APs and ILTs, that helped teachers refine instruction.

To foster strategic instructional practice and promote student achievement, students were provided with opportunities for additional tutoring while campus staff members were provided with professional development (PD) and other supports. AIM principals and one AP, one ILT, and one counselor from each campus met in September 2020 for an AIM 2.0 Feedback and Focus Group. Then, three AIM PD conferences were held in the spring. The PD conference held in January 2021 targeted principals, APs, ILTs, Campus Instructional Coaches (CICs), and counselors.⁴ PD conferences in March and April 2021 targeted APs, ILTs, and CICs.⁵ During the three spring conferences, AIM staff members were presented with a synthesis of AIM 1.0, AIM partnerships, and AIM 2.0 adjustments and goals; content training including the Addressing the Misconception protocol related to Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS); a review of student data such as STAAR and *Common Assessment Four*; and goals for 2020-21 End-of-Year (EOY) assessment results. Other supports provided to teachers included Professional

⁴ Some Executive Directors (EDs), principals, Instructional Lead Coaches (ILCs), coordinators, and teachers also attended.

⁵ Some EDs, principals, ILCs, coordinators, and teachers also attended.

Learning Communities (PLCs). PLCs used Look Forward and Look Back Weekly Data Meetings to align instruction with TEKS standards and help teachers identify gaps in student knowledge and clear action steps to address those gaps.

Last, to foster a transformative, positive culture, campus staff members were provided PD which focused on schoolwide systems and structures, and a joyful environment. Systems and structures training included practices to structure each segment of a student's day with a routine (i.e., 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 also received PD about encouraging a joyful environment (e.g., narrating positive behavior and displaying student work) and modeling positive relationships with adults and students.

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

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 17 teachers assigned to them according to content area (and in most cases, grade level).⁶ ILTs worked closely with APs and in some cases CICs, to ensure lessons aligned with Texas Education Agency guidelines and the district curriculum. ILTs also worked with their PLC CLTs to collaborate on teacher support plans and coaching schedules.

ILTs received a PD summer coaching conference and three PD sessions in spring 2021. The three-day summer session conducted by Engage2Learn provided ILTs with a coaching academy focused on competencies such as small group instruction, communication, digital learning, etc. ILTs were trained on these competencies, given ratings for each competency, and given feedback for how to improve throughout the 2020-21 school year.⁷ Also, ILTs received districtwide PD focused on AIM techniques and skills based on the Get Better Faster 90-Day Program.⁸ Additionally, ILTs attended the three spring 2021 PD conferences with APs and CICs that were mentioned previously. After receiving PD, ILTs supported teachers through direct coaching (observation and feedback cycles) and grade and/or content-level PLCs organized by CLTs to provide the PD they received from AIM central staff members to their teachers.

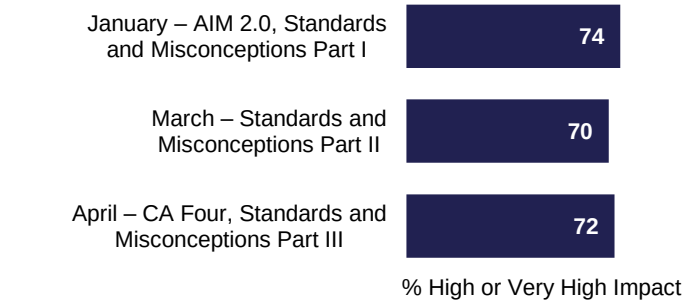
⁶ In some cases, ILTs taught more than two class periods per day depending on the staffing needs for that campus.

What were the perceptions of assistant principals, counselors, and ILTs on AIM campuses?

AP Survey

Of the 73 APs who were sent a survey, 43 responded (59%). APs were most commonly assigned one to two ILTs (91%) and 11 or more teachers who were not ILTs (88%). APs most commonly reported PLCs being held daily (61%) and attending daily (56%). PLCs most often covered lesson plan development (98%), data digs (93%), and Student Expectations (SEs) and TEKS (93%). Between 70 and 74 percent of APs rated the PD sessions as high impact or very high impact (Figure 1).

Figure 1: 2020-21 AIM Assistant Principal Survey Responses About the Impact of Professional Development



Source: AIM AP survey administered spring 2021.
Note: CA = *Common Assessment*. Standards = Priority Standards. Ns (range: 32 to 40) are available in Appendix D of the full report. Responses marked “not applicable” were excluded.

Overall AP satisfaction with colleague collaboration was high. APs reported being somewhat to extremely satisfied with the collaboration with their ILTs (88%), principals (79%), and counselors (77%). Open-ended responses (*N* = 28) indicated successes were the Addressing the Misconception protocol (*n* = 6), collaborating and developing best practices (*n* = 5), consistency (*n* = 5), identifying critical SEs, TEKS, and priority standards (*n* = 5), and using data digs to inform student and teacher progress (*n* = 5). Reported challenges were due to COVID-19 and virtual learning (*n* = 10) and time constraints (*n* = 5).

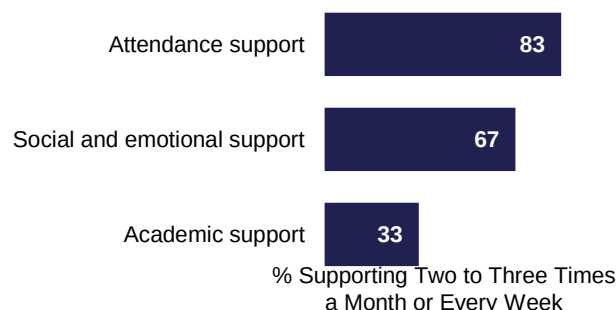
Counselor Survey

Of the 19 counselors who were sent a survey, 12 responded (63%). Counselors most commonly reported guiding students in multiple grades (33%). Most counselors were assigned between 201 to 300 students (58%) Counselors most commonly met with students weekly (42%).

Counselors most commonly reported providing attendance, social and emotional, and academic supports to students two to three times a month or every week (Figure 2).

⁷ For more information about Engage2Learn, see <https://engage2learn.org/>.
⁸ Bambrick-Santoyo (2016).

Figure 2: 2020-21 AIM Counselor Survey Responses for Frequency of Supports Provided to Students Two to Three Times a Month or Every Week



Source: AIM Counselor survey administered spring 2021.

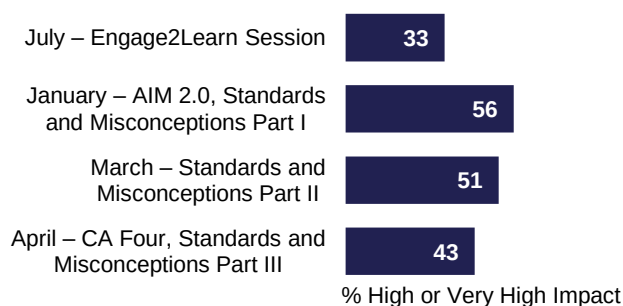
Note: $N = 12$ (Appendix E of the full report).

Counselors most frequently reported collaborating with twenty or more teachers (42%). Overall counselor satisfaction with colleague and parent/guardian collaboration was high (range: 75% to 100%). A majority of counselors reported being supported a great deal or a lot by their APs (83%). As the sample size was small ($N = 12$), the open-ended themes were not reported to maintain the anonymity of the respondents.

ILT Survey

Of the 78 ILTs who were sent a survey, 54 responded (69%). ILTs most commonly served between one to five teachers (59%) and met with the teachers they served daily or a few times a week (80%). Between 33 and 56 percent of ILTs rated the four PD sessions as high impact or very high impact (Figure 3).

Figure 3: 2020-21 AIM ILT Survey Responses About the Impact of Professional Development



Source: AIM ILT survey administered spring 2021.

Note: CA = *Common Assessment*. Standards = *Priority Standards*. Ns (range: 49 to 54) are available in Appendix F of the full report. Responses marked “not applicable” were excluded.

Overall satisfaction with PD was higher than impact ratings. Most ILTs reported being satisfied (either satisfied or very satisfied) with the quality of the feedback and support they received from the CLT (69%), the PD (67%), and the collaboration with school administrators (63%).

Open-ended responses ($N = 54$) indicated successes were building teacher relationships and growing teachers ($n = 12$), lesson planning/time to develop lessons with teachers' input ($n = 11$), and collaboration around best practices (especially with pandemic circumstances; $n = 10$). Challenges reported were virtual teaching/adjusting to new technology requirements ($n = 13$), lack of one-on-one coaching opportunities and live observations ($n = 9$), and time constraints/management ($n = 9$).

What were the AIM campus staff member perceptions of school climate and culture?

Staff member responses to the spring 2021 Climate Survey showed favorable response rates across scales. Of the six scales of the Climate Survey, College Going Culture (74%), Beliefs and Priorities (72%), and Teacher-Teacher Trust (72%) received more favorable response rates than Teacher-Principal Trust (66%), Positive Culture and Environment (64%), and Culture of Feedback and Support (63%). In comparison to spring 2019, favorable response rates increased in spring 2021 across all six scales.

Did AIM students score at or above MAP and STAAR standards?

MAP

For the English and Spanish administrations combined, the overall percentage of students at or above the 50th percentile on EOY MAP was 23 percent on reading and 29 percent on mathematics.⁹

STAAR

Fifty-three percent of AIM students achieved Approaches Grade Level or Above (Approaches+) on STAAR reading and 46 percent met the Approaches+ standard in mathematics in 2020-21.¹⁰ For the Meets Grade Level or Above (Meets+) standard, 22 percent met the standard in reading and 16 percent met the standard in mathematics. From 2018-19 to 2020-21, AIM student STAAR performance decreased in reading and mathematics.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Determine the optimal range for the ILT-to-teacher ratio.

There was a wide range of ILT-to-teacher ratios across AIM campuses (two to 17 teachers per ILT). Of the 54 ILT survey respondents, some ILTs reported challenges with the lack of one-on-one coaching opportunities and live observations ($n = 9$) and with time constraints/management ($n = 9$). A large ILT-to-teacher ratio may negatively impact the time allotted for and quality of support provided by the ILTs to teachers and may potentially impact student outcomes.

Continue allotting time for AIM staff members to collaborate.

APs most commonly reported being satisfied

⁹ Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) demographic data were dated 10/30/20 (2020-21). MAP data were dated 06/23/21 (2020-21 EOY).

¹⁰ PEIMS district data files dated 03/08/19 (2018-19) and 10/30/20 (2020-21). STAAR data files dated 01/23/20 (2018-19) and 06/28/21 (2020-21). No STAAR data were available in 2019-20.

with the collaboration with ILTs (88%) and ILTs most commonly reported being satisfied with the collaboration with school administrators (63%). Both APs ($n = 5$) and ILTs ($n = 10$) listed collaboration around best practices as a success of AIM. AIM staff members reported benefits for opportunities to collaborate; thus, efforts to allow time for collaboration should continue.

Refine the AIM PD to have greater impact, especially on ILTs. Thirty-three to 56 percent of ILTs and 70 to 74 percent of APs responded that the PD sessions they received were impactful. AIM leaders should identify why the PD sessions

were not perceived as more impactful, especially for ILTs, and adjust the PD accordingly.

REFERENCES

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

Tyree, D. (2020). 2019-20 Evaluation of Achieving In the Middle. Dallas, TX. Dallas Independent School District.

EA21-635-4

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