

Texas District Uses Peer Assessments to Measure Scorecard Achievement

by Janet Jacobsen

At a Glance . . .

- The Aldine Independent School District (AISD) used a peer review assessment model to gauge the level of deployment for strategic goals, objectives, and action plans throughout the district.
- During a three-year review cycle, AISD measured 77 indicators of approach, deployment, integration, and learning and captured hundreds of best practices.
- All schools and departments completed three assessments, which confirmed that the district is at full deployment of its objectives and goals.
- AISD's review process received state and national recognition as a best practice for performance improvement, and the district shared its success story in the final round of the International Team Excellence Awards in May 2009.

The Aldine Independent School District (AISD) has enjoyed a long, rich history of continuous quality improvement, earning numerous honors for its work in educating children of poverty and minority students to reach high levels of academic performance. However, the district wasn't following one basic classroom tenet from elementary school—the importance of sharing. As a district, Aldine wasn't making the grade in documenting its practices and sharing successful strategies for student learning, thus creating gaps in deploying key initiatives.

About the Aldine Independent School District

AISD is the 12th largest district in the state of Texas and 70th in the nation with 72 schools serving approximately 61,000 students in the Houston area. The student population is 65.3 percent Hispanic and 29.5 percent African American. More than 84 percent of students come from economically disadvantaged homes.

Despite the challenges that educating such a large and diverse population can present, the district has captured numerous state and national awards for performance and improvement in student achievement. Notably, AISD was named a finalist four times in six years for the Broad Prize for Urban Education, winning the prize in September 2009. The award honors urban districts that demonstrate improvement in student achievement while reducing achievement gaps among poor and minority students.

Identifying Deployment Gaps

The district's continuous improvement journey began in the 1990s when state standardized testing identified AISD as a low performing district. Members of the board of education and other leaders had a different idea—they envisioned AISD as a high performer and began using the *Baldrige Criteria for Performance Excellence*, Hoshin planning (a strategic planning process), process management, and benchmarking to drive systematic improvement across the district. In 2000, AISD was selected as one of six large, urban school districts to participate in a pilot program to implement the education criteria for the Baldrige in Education Initiative (BiEN), which is based on the national Baldrige program. Results came quickly. In 2006 the district received the Texas Award for Performance Excellence (TAPE) and still remains the largest and only urban district to win this state quality award.

In the midst of the district's quality journey, AISD leaders saw opportunities for improvement based on gaps in balanced scorecards. Feedback reports from TAPE examiners and the Baldrige program, as well as analysis stemming from the Broad Urban Award, all identified gaps in deploying key initiatives throughout AISD. It soon became evident that AISD, while proficient in educating children of poverty, was deficient in sharing and documenting its practices. After reviewing internal scorecards, external assessments, and research, the district

embarked on a peer review process designed to perform the following functions:

- Determine the level of deployment of strategic objectives and goals.
- Use data and process documentation to find instructional approaches that result in high levels of academic success.
- Capture best practices.
- Share knowledge regarding breakthrough operational and support process improvements.

Adopting a Peer Review Process

From the start, key stakeholders in the peer review project included the senior leaders of the district, particularly the superintendent and cabinet members, who needed a better understanding of gaps in the implementation of programs, projects, interventions, relationship building with students, and process consistencies. Additional stakeholders included:

- Faculty and staff
- The district's 61,000 students and their families
- Community members
- Taxpayers

As part of the project selection process, multiple levels of leaders, teachers, family members, and business partners were invited to serve on review teams. The district adopted this multi-functional approach to promote diverse thinking and to dispel the "this solution wasn't invented here" syndrome.

The initial peer assessments, which began during the 2005-06 school year, were based on evaluations of the highest and lowest performing schools in the district as evidenced from scorecard and Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) results. By using key performance data and scores from the peer feedback report, district leaders could measure improvement over time for specific schools or departments. Aldine's leaders adapted the assessment tool, which they initially discovered through the Stupski Foundation, to also include literacy, relationship building, and rigor of instruction.

The goal was to use peer assessments not only to identify implementation gaps, but also to capture breakthrough approaches for sustaining high levels of student success. To accomplish this, the assessments aligned to the district's three strategic objectives, which include:

1. Demonstrate sustained growth in student achievement.
2. Implement effective management strategies to improve student behavior.
3. Improve parent/community relationships by creating welcoming environments in all campuses and facilities.

The assessment and documentation evidence support how a school or district operation achieves high performance levels. This process enables the district to collect, document, and provide access to best practices in instructional strategies,

behavioral management processes, process documentation/improvements, and positive relationship building with both students and other stakeholders.

Peer Review Teams

Either the principal or the department's director leads each peer review team. In addition, five to seven others—including counselors, instructional coaches, teachers, parents/family members, and business partners—serve as team members. Dr. Archie Blanson, deputy superintendent, and Laura Longmire, a partner at SQI, the district's consulting firm, also participated on each of the 97 teams during the first three-year cycle.

Participants commit five days per year to the process. They attend a one and a half-day training session, which covers assessment methodology; recognition of best practices; and how to review documents, scorecards, and action plans. Members review and edit feedback reports and attend feedback meetings.

The Review Process

AISD's peer assessments provide an in-depth look at school- and department-level progress all the way down to individual action plans. The assessment teams use a six-point scoring rubric, ranging from 0 to 5, to determine the level of performance in seven core areas of systems-based performance, based on the Baldrige framework:

- Leadership
- Strategic planning
- Student, stakeholder, and market focus
- Measurement analysis and knowledge management
- Faculty and staff focus
- Process management
- Results

Data used to determine performance levels are tied to the district's balanced scorecard and strategic goals. These data include:

- Student academic performance based on interim and year-end assessments
- Attendance
- Behavior/discipline statistics
- Employee and stakeholder satisfaction measures
- Complaints
- Employee retention rates
- Professional development hours per person, per year
- Budget and variances
- Safety and security evaluation ratings

To determine performance levels for schools and departments, review teams look for data reflecting improvement over time, benchmarked performance, and action plans that close the loop on areas for improvement. If any key indicators are not on target, information is collected and reviewed to determine what corrective actions are in place.

Scoring the School or Department

Under AISD’s assessment model the target score of a 3 equates to an “A,” signifying a completely deployed systematic approach that produces high levels of performance over time. A 4 rating includes everything in the 3 range, plus full implementation, and an approach, process, or tool that is fully documented with cycles of improvement. For a school or department to earn a 5, it must demonstrate documented approaches that align to the district’s goals and objectives, show sustained high levels of results and cycles of improvement to the approach, and have completed an external validation as a benchmark best practice.

The school or department evaluated receives an overall category score. Feedback reports include statements of three or four strengths in each category as well as three to five opportunities for improvement (OFI). School and department action plans are expected to address OFIs.

Overcoming Resistance

Training, thoughtful communication, and the participation of leaders all help reassure AISD employees that the peer assessment process isn’t a “gotcha” event, but rather a time for learning and sharing the positives. Longmire interviews principals and department leaders so the sessions are not perceived to be part of their performance evaluations. This approach helps break down barriers and identify opportunities for feedback to senior leaders. Should department leaders or principals feel they might receive negative feedback, they can select who will hear the assessment report.

After the Review

Once a school or department’s peer review is completed, the scores from the seven categories are posted in a district-wide spreadsheet with scores correlating to a district rubric of performance levels. Any score of two or lower is targeted for root cause analysis. OFIs are determined by the data collected. When instructional OFIs are identified, teachers have access to district and national databases of research and best practices and strategies. AISD also analyzes crosscutting areas for improvement and researches these topics. The district then provides national experts to offer professional development opportunities. Principals and instructional specialists (coaches) model the new strategies, and benchmark evaluations are used to determine the success of any new approaches. The same steps are also used for business process improvements, but, in this case, best practices are determined by benchmarking with industry leaders rather than other school districts.

The district reports and analyzes quarterly scorecard results. To ensure that all leaders understand that improvement efforts won’t fade away once the feedback report is received, area superintendents or executive cabinet members conduct follow-up activities, typically in the form of action plans and scorecard reviews on both a quarterly and annual basis. On the other hand, when a

specific learning objective achieves breakthrough improvement, a school or department is invited to demonstrate and share its best practice. Once these practices are captured, they are added to a best practices knowledge base. Blanson reports that the peer assessment process helped the district to capture more than 800 best practices that are now shared across the district.

Boosting Student Achievement and Improving Benchmarking

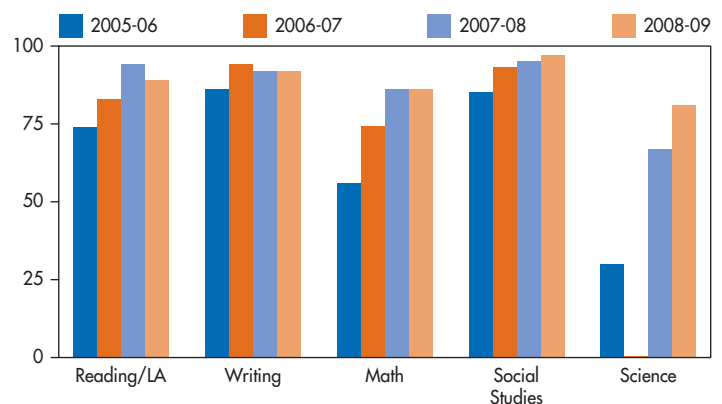
As noted earlier, the district’s top objective is sustained growth in student achievement. During the first three-year cycle and into the first year of the second cycle, the district showed marked improvement in student achievement. Figure 1 shows that the percentage of students achieving passing scores increased in nearly every subject area each year.

One of the key findings during the first year’s peer assessments showed that AISD limited its benchmarking to schools or processes within the district. Since this finding, all department and school action plans include key actions and priorities for benchmarking with other districts or Baldrige winning organizations, as well as plans for participating in American Productivity and Quality Center benchmarking activities.

Including key stakeholders on each review team enables principals, teacher leaders, and operational directors to see how other leaders communicate, lead, review progress, and implement initiatives. District leaders report that the assessment process helps them validate their leadership practices, learn new approaches, and identify gaps in the ways their instructional teams work. Teachers and parents learn new and effective approaches for planning, integrating technology, and differentiating instruction to meet individual student learning needs. Business partners and parents gain a better understanding of how schools are managed, and some businesses become advocates for the schools and now volunteer their time and resources.

Blanson says, “The peer review is the tool that enabled the entire district to further the full implementation of our strategic objec-

Figure 1—Percent of students passing Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills Tests



tives.” In addition to meeting this goal, the following results were achieved during the first three-year cycle:

- A systematic approach for evaluating goal deployment and effective leadership at all levels of the district was introduced.
- Seventy percent of all schools in the district achieved one of the two highest ratings (recognized and exemplary) in state testing.
- Ninety-seven schools and operational departments completed peer reviews as well as two additional self-assessments.
- Future executive leaders for the district were identified based on their approaches, best practices, and results. Three principals earned promotions to cabinet positions.
- Taxpayers, community members, and family members participated in the peer review process, which increased their understanding and support of the district’s work.
- Overarching themes such as benchmarking and leadership development for future improvement strategies were identified.
- The district earned state and national recognition for its breakthrough approach for systemic reform.
- The documentation prepared by the departments and schools for the peer review process was so thorough that it also served as preparation for site visits for state and national quality awards and as support material for the state accreditation process.

Once the first three-year cycle was complete, the district shared its success by participating in the International Team Excellence Awards. As a finalist, the AISD Peer Review Team presented its story to an international audience during ASQ’s World Conference on Quality and Improvement in May 2009.

Beginning Second Review Cycle

Eager to continue its successful improvement process, the district started a second cycle of peer assessments in the fall of 2008. The peer review process was modified slightly based on three key inputs from the first round of assessments:

- Capture lessons learned over the first three years of peer assessments.
- Obtain recommendations for improvement from stakeholders.
- Update the assessment tools based on revised educational criteria from the Baldrige program.

AISD officials also updated the scoring rubric by including more detail to help employees understand what they need to

accomplish to improve their scores. Revised action plans provide details on how departments and schools in the district are moving their systems to even higher levels of performance.

The district also increased its expectations for the second round of peer reviews as it aims to have 90 percent of departments and schools scoring threes, fours, or fives on the assessments and receiving one of two top ratings on state tests. Judging by AISD’s history of success with continuous improvement initiatives, this second cycle of reviews should once again earn the district a place at the top of the honor roll.

For More Information:

- To learn more about the Aldine Independent School District, visit www.aldine.k12.tx.us or call Dr. Archie Blanson at 281-985-6301.
- Contact Laura Longmire via e-mail at longmirel@aol.com or by telephone at 281-684-3183 for additional information regarding the district’s peer assessment tool.
- Details on the International Team Excellence Awards process are available at <http://wcqi.asq.org/team-competition/index.html>.

About the Author

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