Dallas Independent School District: Advancing Equitable Access to Great Schools

Common Challenge
In 2014, Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD) had significant performance disparities across its 234 schools—43 of which were designated as “Improvement Required” by the state. Many low-income students lacked equitable access to high-performing schools, and middle-income students were exiting the district to attend charter and private schools at greater rates than ever before.

Dallas ISD’s Approach
The district implemented a dual approach to improve equity and excellence across all schools: It combined intensive supports to the lowest-performing schools with programmatic transformations to a broader range of schools spread across the district. To sustainably support this more diverse system of schools, the central office transformed its support and accountability systems.

Dallas ISD’s Results
This approach has increased student access to high-quality schools with diverse programming and improved student performance across the district. Since implementation began, ELA proficiency on the state assessment increased from 27 percent to 40 percent, and the number of “Improvement Required” schools in the district has dropped from 43 schools to 4 schools.\(^2\)\(^3\)
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ERS Districts at Work Framework

We studied eight school districts that struggled with the same challenges as many urban systems around the country—and like many others, the eight districts we studied set strategic priorities that they hoped would address their challenges. What sets these eight districts apart is that they didn’t stop there.

Think of these strategic priorities as a gear—without focusing on what is needed to power it, the gear stays stationary. Just setting the right strategic priorities is not enough to produce or sustain the results district and school leaders hope for.

Leaders from Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD) and the other districts we studied rolled up their sleeves to carefully and collaboratively construct three other gears that effectively powered their strategic priorities. They developed a clear theory of action by identifying: (A) the big changes that schools needed to make to power progress toward the strategic priorities, and (B) how the central office needed to support schools to successfully implement those changes. To power their theory of action, these districts made tough trade-offs in a series of resource shifts, and they made process shifts to ensure central office management structures enabled schools to efficiently, effectively, and sustainably implement the changes.
Dallas ISD: Strategic Priorities

In 2014, Dallas ISD set a goal of ensuring that every student could access a “best-fit” school—defined as a school where “educators more meaningfully and deeply engage students intellectually by tapping into their specific interests, aspirations, preferred learning styles, personal circumstances, and values.”

Two strategic priorities (which Dallas ISD calls “Strategic Initiatives”) supported the district’s efforts to increase the overall number of best-fit schools:

Transform instruction and student learning at consistently low-performing schools. Through the Accelerating Campus Excellence (ACE) initiative, Dallas ISD transformed persistently low-performing schools, especially in geographically isolated areas of the city.

Expand diverse programming options across the city. Through Dallas ISD’s Public School Choice initiative, the district invested in creating new and transformed school programs—for example, personalized learning, Montessori, and STEM options—across all regions of the city. The district also increased enrollment flexibilities to give students from any neighborhood greater access to schools that matched their interests and learning styles.

While focusing on new and turnaround schools and programs as part of these two strategic priorities, the district simultaneously identified a set of additional priorities to improve students’ access to rigorous and engaging instruction across all schools. These additional priorities included: expanded pre-K, increased access to early college coursework and Pathways to Technology (PTECH), and transformed support for teachers and school leaders as part of the system for support, evaluation, and strategic compensation (called the Teacher Excellence Initiative). Although this case study will not address them in detail, these efforts have been instrumental to Dallas ISD’s performance improvement during the last several years. Learn more on Dallas ISD’s website.

At the end of the day, we need to define and create structures with strategic staffing and ongoing support. Our work is about strategic thinking that leads to a dynamic multi-tiered plan. Ultimately, change comes from within.

-Stephanie Elizalde, chief of school leadership
Dallas ISD: Sustaining Investment in Strategic Priorities

In 2015, Superintendent Michael Hinojosa publicly committed to the district “funding our strategic initiatives first.” His plan was to demonstrate positive student achievement results, and then use those results to push for additional citywide tax revenue to sustain the initiatives. To do this, the executive leadership team made tough trade-offs to free general fund dollars for their ambitious priorities. The toughest trade-off was the decision to freeze the salaries of all central office and school support (such as custodians and secretaries) staff members for four years, through the 2018-19 school year.

To build community support for the plan, the superintendent and executive leadership team carefully tracked and reported student progress related to every strategic priority.* In November 2018, the district successfully secured $126 million in a Tax Ratification Election to continue funding the strategic priorities, to provide a long-awaited compensation increase to central office and school support staff, and to deepen investments in improving racial equity.

Summary of Strategic Priority Investments

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategic Priority</th>
<th>Percent of Budget in 2014-15**</th>
<th>Additional Annual Spending Since 2014-15</th>
<th>Revenue Source(s)***</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ACE</td>
<td>0.8 percent</td>
<td>$10 million$</td>
<td>General operating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public School Choice</td>
<td>0.2 percent</td>
<td>$3 million$</td>
<td>General operating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Title II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A small grant from New School Venture Fund</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early College High Schools</td>
<td>1.3 percent</td>
<td>$17 million$</td>
<td>General operating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Pre-existing bond funds</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Excellence Initiative</td>
<td>1.5 – 2.3 percent</td>
<td>$20 – 30 million$</td>
<td>General operating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A mid-size grant from the Texas Education Agency’s Educator Excellence Initiative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Learning</td>
<td>0.2 – 0.8 percent</td>
<td>$3 – 11 million$</td>
<td>General operating</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Title I</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Title II</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total</strong></td>
<td>4.0 – 5.6 percent of budget</td>
<td>$43 – 54 million annually</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* See the district’s comprehensive set of annual program evaluations for more detail.

** The total budget was $1.3 billion.

*** General operating funds were originally freed through the salary freeze described above and later through a tax levy.

“We in school districts deal with people’s most prized possessions—their money and their kids—and if we don’t have a history of delivering, it’s hard for them to trust us with either. But once we started delivering, we went to the taxpayers.”

-Michael Hinojosa, superintendent, at the 2018 Urban Superintendents Academy conference

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** The total budget was $1.3 billion.
*** General operating funds were originally freed through the salary freeze described above and later through a tax levy.
Dallas ISD: Theory of Action

Dallas ISD leaders didn’t stop after setting the district’s two strategic priorities: First, they identified big changes that schools needed to make to power progress toward the strategic priorities. Then, they identified how the central office needed to support schools to successfully implement those changes. Together, these school-level changes and central office supports formed the district’s theory of action. To power their theory of action, Dallas ISD made a series of resource shifts and process shifts. Going beyond initial strategic priorities by developing and powering this theory of action is what sets Dallas ISD apart.

Dallas ISD’s theory of action was composed of four major parts:

#1
Sustainably transform supports and resources in consistently low-performing schools.

Why?
In most urban districts, turnaround efforts include an infusion of resources or a dramatic programming change—but improvement efforts often falter when schools can’t sustain important changes after the turnaround period ends. Dallas ISD’s innovative approach to turnaround ACE schools focused on changes designed to ensure long-term performance improvements.

#2
Launch “new” innovative programs in existing schools with strong instructional foundations.

Why?
Dallas ISD needed to figure out a financially sustainable way to geographically distribute new, high-quality school options across the city in a way that matched overall demand for seats, and that equitably served the neediest neighborhoods. The district designed a rigorous, community-driven process for implementing new and experimental school programming.

#3
Ensure students’ equitable access to diverse, best-fit schools—especially low-income students and students living in neighborhoods with fewer school options.

Why?
Dallas ISD already had a robust magnet system and flexible enrollment rules before the expansion of innovative open-enrollment school options—but only 12 percent of students took advantage of them, and families were opting out of Dallas ISD schools altogether at greater rates each year. The district invested in transportation, community outreach, and enrollment system upgrades to ensure sustainable student enrollment in new and existing programs, and to increase all families’ equitable access to the full range of school options.
#4
Implement a tiered system of supports and autonomies for schools, based on performance and student needs.

Why?
Coordinating support and accountability for schools that operate with a range of programming, governance models, and student needs can be a daunting challenge. The central office worked proactively to evolve alongside the district’s expanding system of schools by defining service models for every department and transparently tiering supports for schools with diverse needs.

**Dallas ISD: District at a Glance**

- Second Largest District in Texas
- 156,832 Students
- 234 Schools (2017-18)

**Latinx* Students (2017-18):** 70%

**Black Students (2017-18):** 22%

**English Language Learners (2017-18):** 44%

**Economically Disadvantaged Students (2017-18):** 86%

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*“Latinx” is the gender-neutral alternative to “Latino” or “Latina,” meaning a person of Latin American origin or descent. Common pronunciation is “lah-TEEN-ex” or “lah-teen-EX.” ERS chose to study districts with high populations of black, Latinx, and low-income students to highlight school systems that are actively addressing longstanding inequities.
Sustainably transform supports and resources in consistently low-performing schools.

Dallas ISD leaders knew that increasing students’ access to existing high-quality schools across the district would not change the fact that during the 2013-14 school year, 43 schools (18 percent of the district) were designated as “Improvement Required,” according to the Texas school report card system. An “Improvement Required” designation meant a school did not meet targets for student achievement, student progress, and achievement gap closure.

In fact, expansion of open-enrollment schools could reduce community support and attendance at those 43 schools, further depleting them of resources. To address this risk, Dallas ISD created the ACE initiative in 2015-16, concurrent with the launch of the broader Public School Choice initiative, to provide 13 schools (expanded to 20 in 2018-19) with an infusion of resources and support. As of 2017-18, this investment totaled approximately $1,000 per student, or $10 million annually.

Resource Shifts

People

The ACE program used stipends and strong leadership to attract and retain highly effective teachers and support staff in a subset of “Improvement Required” schools. The district’s existing educator effectiveness system, the Teacher Excellence Initiative, provided multiple performance data points—such as student growth, classroom observations, and student and family surveys. This information helped leaders identify highly effective educators and match them to schools’ unique needs. Upon designating a new ACE school, the district assigned the school a new principal and assistant principal who were rated highly on the district’s evaluation system and had strong track records at other schools. Staff who already worked at the school were able to either transfer internally or re-interview for their positions with the new principal, who could also hire staff members from across the district. Once hiring was complete, all school instructional staff received significant stipends—ranging from $8,000 to $15,000, based on position and evaluation ratings—paid out in three annual installments. This stipend investment totaled $8.5 million and constituted the vast majority of the $9.8 million (roughly 1 percent of the district’s operating budget) invested into the ACE program. Dallas ISD initially funded ACE stipends through the general fund as part of a broader investment in teacher salaries that required them to freeze all non-teaching staff salaries for four years. Based upon the proven success of this investment, the district secured dedicated ongoing funding for ACE schools as part of a revenue package approved by voters in a November 2018 Tax Ratification Election (see page 5).

In addition, principals of ACE schools benefited from support provided by a dedicated school supervisor (called an executive director) and four instructional coaches (called math and ELA academic facilitators)—compared with two instructional coaches per feeder pattern across the rest of the district. These instructional coaches were employed solely to oversee ACE schools, therefore they were able to devote more of their time and individual attention to coaching each ACE leader.

Artifact #1: ACE Initiative Evaluation (2017-18 Abstract)
Dallas ISD changed the schedule of all ACE schools to provide students with additional instruction each day. First, campuses extended the formal school day by one hour. ACE schools were required to use this additional instructional time for extended math and reading blocks. Teachers also delivered an integrated social-emotional learning program—including adoption of restorative justice practices—to address conflicts and disciplinary incidents. Next, ACE schools began to stay open until 6:00 p.m., two to three days per week, for extracurricular activities, tutoring, and dinner for students. Transportation home was guaranteed for all students. Initially, instructional staff were compensated for this extended day through the stipends described on page 8. This made the time investment cost-neutral. However, ACE leadership found that these after-school responsibilities were not sustainable for teachers to maintain alongside their instructional duties, so they recently began bringing in external partners or staff to oversee students and enable teachers to focus on planning, student data, and professional learning.

In addition, ACE teachers and leaders participated in job-embedded professional learning time. Each week, teachers spent three hours outside of the school day on either adult or student learning—a time commitment reflected in the stipends described on page 8. School leaders allocated the time as needed to extend teachers’ professional learning communities (PLCs) or students’ direct instruction. Instructional coaches intensively supported cycles of professional learning by coordinating with external partners (Teaching Trust and Big Rock Education) to provide best practices and baseline training. During PLC time, instructional coaches sat “elbow to elbow” with teachers to translate the district’s six-week curriculum pacing guides into daily lesson plans, develop in-lesson exit tickets or checks for understanding, and analyze a range of student data.

Process Shifts

Timelines

For the first cohort of schools demonstrating three years of performance improvement under ACE, ACE leaders thoughtfully sequenced schools’ transition back out of the ACE program to ensure schools would sustain progress. In many districts, turnaround schools receive an infusion of supports similar to those provided in the ACE model—but most struggle to maintain performance improvements when those resources are later scaled back. In Dallas ISD, schools that transitioned out of the ACE program ceased payment of additional stipends to most instructional staff and school leaders—but this reduction in pay came with a parallel reduction in the length of the working day. ACE schools have also been able to maintain an additional full-time equivalent (FTE) above the typical school allocation—in most ACE schools, this allocated to an assistant principal or other instructional leader. During the first year of transition back to “original feeder pattern” for six ACE schools, 20 percent of teachers within each school became designated “transition leaders” who received $2,000 annual stipends and were responsible for carrying forward the instructional and cultural changes that schools adopted, and for collecting feedback from staff about how the transition was unfolding.16

Although ACE schools no longer receive additional on-site professional learning from ACE program staff, teachers and leaders are invited to all off-site professional learning opportunities. All former ACE schools keep these transition supports until they earn an A or B on the Texas school report card and meet district-defined school climate targets, as measured by student and staff surveys. Though the original six ACE schools are still in their first year of transition out of the program, program staff express optimism that the climate, culture, and learning transformations at these schools will persist with careful monitoring and support.
Launch “new” innovative programs in existing schools with strong instructional foundations.

Dallas ISD needed to figure out how to geographically distribute new, high-quality school options across the city in ways that were: (A) financially sustainable, (B) matched overall demand for seats, and (C) equitably served the neediest neighborhoods. This challenge was exacerbated by declining enrollment, as higher-income families opted out of district schools at greater rates, and revenue dollars from the state flowed out with them. To develop and sustain a diverse system of schools, the district needed to attract students back to city schools. The superintendent and executive leadership team (ELT) designed multiple pathways for schools to transform—including embedding new programs into existing schools, allowing existing school leadership teams to completely rethink their school designs, and expanding seats at schools with high demand. Dallas ISD prioritized the equitable distribution of programs geographically across district neighborhoods.

Resource Shifts

People
The district created a new Office of Transformation and Innovation (OTI) to vet the academic and operational visions of all new school proposals against a set of guiding principles, which included equitable geographic distribution and the types of instructional approaches offered. OTI assumed responsibility for three classifications of best-fit schools:

- **Transformation Schools**
  New schools, launched by a new leadership team, with fully open-choice enrollment.

- **Innovation Schools**
  Neighborhood schools that maintained their identity and preference for neighborhood students, but offered new programming designed by the current school leadership team.

- **Magnet Schools**
  OTI oversaw pre-existing magnet schools to coordinate program expansions and enrollment using lottery-based student assignment models.

As part of this work, OTI provided academic and operational support to each school leadership team during the proposal, planning, and start-up phases.

Artifact #2: Public School Choice Initiative Evaluation (2017-18 Abstract)

Money
Dallas ISD allocated four years of start-up funds to support every Transformation and Innovation school. During the 2017-18 school year, 17 Transformation and Innovation schools received a combined $3 million per year (ranging from $50,000 to $350,000 per campus, depending on changes to programs and facilities). This was initially funded out of the general fund; implementation funds for future OTI schools were part of the spending package the district requested from the community in the November 2018 Tax Ratification Election (see page 5). Transformation and Innovation schools thoughtfully planned how they would use their additional funds. First, OTI provided stipends to compensate future leadership teams for
participating in in-depth planning. Then, all Transformation and Innovation school leaders received training on selecting a design model for their school and *spent six months designing that model, including assessing community needs and staff capacity, creating a master schedule and staffing plan, and envisioning a “day in the life” of a student in the future school.* After a school launched, funds were allocated to any necessary start-up training for teachers, new technology or materials purchases, and the hiring of program-relevant staff. OTI *provided broad spending flexibility with significant oversight and support*—and all school leaders created a four-year sustainability plan that identified funding sources for all ongoing costs after start-up funds expire.

**Process Shifts**

**Mindsets**

OTI espoused the idea that *the pursuit of equity and excellence are not mutually exclusive* in marketing materials and during all outreach and collaboration efforts with central office leaders, principals, teachers, and families. Deputy Chief of Transformation and Innovation Angie Gaylord shared, “I talk to so many people—innovation officers in other districts—all of it is about turnaround and ‘stopping the bleed.’ None of it is looking at middle-class kids, or gifted kids, or rethinking how we frame innovation. We focus so much on remediating in urban settings instead of accelerating. How are we accelerating so that our middle-class kids and our kids in poverty are getting resources that will put them in a world where they can be critical thinkers, problem solvers, and leaders? That’s the mindset that our team talks through with principals. It’s easy for them to say, ‘I’m good, the state says I’m a B- or C-rated school’—no, we want you to think outside the box when it comes to student outcomes! We want you to hack your organizational systems! What are some different inputs you can try that will get outputs you can’t even imagine?”

**Roles**

Counter to the top-down approach to launching new schools that takes place in many districts, OTI *encouraged community groups and current or aspiring Dallas ISD school leaders to apply to launch a Transformation or Innovation school and to champion innovative program ideas.* This ensured schools had strong leadership teams and allowed communities to advocate for the programs they wanted. OTI staff met with all principals in each region at the start of each proposal cycle to encourage them to talk to parents and community members about their goals for their children and their vision of “what my child needs to be workforce ready.” Though staff provided significant support to applicants along the way, the application process culminated in a competitive pitch to a cross-functional district panel, maintaining a spirit of innovation and competition. In keeping with a focus on equity, OTI staff *monitored application trends to ensure that proposed new schools did not become too lopsided by the geographic areas served or the types of programming offered.*

*Artifact #3: Public School Choice Proposal Form*

When proposals come in, it starts with an ‘all-call’ to campus leaders. It’s more targeted in areas where students need more options. This year we needed additional options and programs in South Dallas [an area with historically fewer options and a large charter sector], so we targeted those principals, met with them, and encouraged them. Now, we have two schools where the entire faculty *spent six months redesigning the culture, climate, learning technology, and professional development.* One is about to be a new STEAM school and the other is about to be a new blended learning school. Both have made wall-to-wall changes.

—Angie Gaylord, deputy chief of transformation and innovation
#3
Ensure students’ equitable access to diverse, best-fit schools—especially low-income students and students living in neighborhoods with fewer school options.

District leaders knew that traditional school choice strategies can widen achievement gaps (rather than shrink them) if only advantaged or high-performing students participate in open enrollment. Dallas ISD’s pre-existing group of magnet schools illustrated this; they historically enrolled more white and middle-class students than the rest of the city’s schools. The superintendent and executive leadership team pursued the dual goal of attracting middle-class families back to the district and broadening access to district schools for current families by deepening community outreach, expanding transportation supports, and devoting staff to ongoing monitoring and continuous improvement of school diversity.

Resource Shifts

Money
The district guaranteed transportation outside of traditional attendance zones for all students and invested in additional outreach to families. At the outset of the Public School Choice initiative, Dallas ISD projected an annual cost of $835 per student for out-of-zone transportation and set aside $19.7 million to meet these needs. The superintendent and executive leadership team reached consensus that “equal access to choice options for our kids is a non-negotiable” and collaborated to continuously look for transportation spending efficiencies. As bus routes got more complex, they realized that they could save money by transitioning transportation out of an external contractor to district oversight. This shift allowed a dedicated OTI staff member to collaborate directly with the district’s transportation director and creatively problem-solve around bus routes for students in choice schools.

People
OTI launched five “one-stop-shop” enrollment centers (called ONE Centers) in each region of the city. ONE Centers were staffed by service representatives with flexible hours (7:30 a.m. – 6:00 p.m., Monday – Friday), who helped families navigate the range of school options in the district. An additional center, the Margaret and Gilbert Herrera Student Intake Center, welcomed and assisted all students and families who were new to the United States by supporting enrollment decisions, language testing, and orientation to the school system. Beyond this investment in staff “hitting the pavement” to inform families about Dallas ISD, OTI also collaborated with the district’s Communications Services department to coordinate recruiting and marketing efforts about all the district’s school options. Together, the two departments fund a range of awareness efforts—from billboards and enrollment guides, to targeted media and public events that celebrate new Transformation and Innovation schools.

In 2017, Dallas ISD launched the Racial Equity Office with the specific goal of reducing ongoing disparities in performance and school enrollment among English language learners (ELL students) and black students, especially in secondary schools. This seven-member central office team monitored enrollment and performance trends on an ongoing basis and is currently creating districtwide recommendations for improving equity. During the first year,
the team’s initiatives included “consultative reviews” of equity and inclusion practices in key central office departments, expanded community partnerships focused on socioeconomic and racial equity, and a pilot supplementary funding opportunity called Funds for Achievement and Racial Equity (FARE). The Racial Equity Office’s total budget is $6.2 million, or approximately $400 per pupil, including $3 million in FARE funds allocated to high-need schools.\(^{21}\)

Artifact #4: Board Policy on Racial Equity

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Process Shifts

Data & Tools

OTI evaluated new school proposals against existing geographic, programming, and performance gaps. The department set a goal of equitably distributing the overall number of choice schools and the types of instructional approaches across the city—and favored instructional approaches that were attractive to Dallas ISD families of all backgrounds. During the process of planning new schools, OTI required Transformation and Innovation school applicants to present a range of data showing demand for the school’s desired model based on gaps in programming, geography, or student group or grade levels served. For example, the original proposal for Dallas ISD’s Ignite Middle School highlighted a lack of choice options in the middle grades, combined with a districtwide middle school performance drop-off (and widening of racial and socioeconomic achievement gaps), to advocate for their personalized learning model.

OTI also set up multiple measures to ensure economically disadvantaged students had equitable access to lottery-based schools. During the first three years of the district’s Public School Choice initiative, OTI performed “equity audits” after each school’s lottery process to compare the socioeconomic diversity of admitted students to the district as a whole. In cases with a smaller group of economically disadvantaged students, OTI gave preference to those students on the waitlist as seats opened up. During the 2017-18 school year, OTI transitioned to a weighted lottery system across the majority of lottery-based Transformation schools to more proactively ensure a minimum 50/50 split between economically disadvantaged and non-economically disadvantaged students. This system—based on extensive research about the impacts of economically diverse schools for both low- and higher-income students—directly ameliorated the fact that only 4 out of 234 schools in the district were previously considered economically diverse (enrolling 40 – 60 percent economically disadvantaged students).\(^{22}\)

Artifact #5: Ignite Middle School Proposal

Artifact #6: Dallas ISD: Integration as Innovation (Century Foundation Article)

Artifact #7: Dallas ISD’s Policy Memo on a Weighted Lottery for Socioeconomic Status
Implement a tiered system of supports and autonomies for schools, based on performance and student needs.

Coordinating cross-functional central office supports for school leaders across 230+ schools is a feat in any district—and in Dallas ISD, the increasing diversity of school programs and governance models added to this complexity. To make ongoing school funding and support shifts that often involved differentiating scarce financial resources and time to schools most in need of support, Dallas ISD needed a standardized way to monitor performance across schools. In 2017, district leaders redesigned central office support and monitoring using a “Managed Instruction with Earned Empowerment” theory of action. Then, they created a School Performance Framework, linked all central office departments’ models of service for schools to that framework, and coordinated supports through a network of school supervisors.

Process Shifts

Data & Tools
To add more nuance to the binary school performance rating system used by the state, Dallas ISD created a School Performance Framework (SPF) that was applicable to all school programs and governance types. As the district steadily reduced the number of state-identified “Improvement Required” schools, it became important for central office staff to see a more nuanced picture of school needs than Texas’s binary “Improvement Required/Meets Standard” system. In addition to the measures of performance, achievement gaps, and postsecondary readiness included in the Texas rating system, Dallas ISD’s School Performance Framework incorporated district-developed School Effectiveness Indices (a value-added student growth metric), extracurricular participation metrics, and survey data from staff, students, and families.

Roles
The district’s central office clarified expectations for school leaders by identifying “non-negotiables” and linking flexibilities to performance. First, Dallas ISD reaffirmed its commitment to two core non-negotiables across all schools:

- **Core Non-Negotiable #1**
  Consistent, standards-aligned curriculum (all schools implemented a new K-12 curriculum beginning in fall 2018)

- **Core Non-Negotiable #2**
  Standardized teacher evaluation, compensation, and support (via the district’s Teacher Excellence Initiative)
Beyond these two non-negotiables, the district articulated principals’ other flexibilities in its Theory of Action Playbook, including tiers based on school performance using the SPF. The Theory of Action Playbook was the result of over a year of cross-functional central office work sessions, and it describes the standards of service that all schools can expect to receive from each central office department. In the playbook, the district also outlined relevant flexibilities available to leaders. For example, within the Human Capital Management category, principals of schools rated at the highest “Accomplished” level on SPF were granted the flexibility to independently design a “staffing model of choice,” including full-time equivalent conversions, job description changes, and job-sharing options; schools with lower ratings were granted limited flexibility and were required to seek approval from successively higher levels within School Leadership and Human Capital Management.

**Artifact #8: Theory of Action Playbook (2018-19)**

"When you get outcomes, you get autonomies. We are a true system of schools, so we will have standardization, but school-level success allows leaders to deviate from standards when they’ve earned autonomy. As an example, the ACE schools take a very standardized and structured approach to school improvement; most choice schools are almost at the other end of the continuum with a lot of flexibility and creativity."

- Brian Lusk, chief of strategic initiatives

The district’s central office departments organized to spend more time serving the district’s lowest-performing schools. Each school-facing department formally differentiated its standards of service for highest-need schools. For example, to better support services for ELL students, central office-based instructional specialists committed to visiting all campuses rated C and below on SPF once per week to coach a principal, push into a teacher team’s collaboration time, or to help principals and teachers deliver schoolwide professional development. This extra commitment required the district to limit instructional specialists’ support for campuses rated A and B to appointment-only. Dallas ISD’s recruiting team committed to rendering additional services to the lowest-performing schools, including more frequent site visits from recruiters, daily monitoring of teacher vacancies—and a rapid response to fill them—and earlier access to teacher candidates during hiring season. The district provided funds for leaders of the highest-need schools to attend additional job fairs and invited them to participate in districtwide hiring events an hour before leaders from other schools could join.

"There is a focus on equity and supporting schools that need the most with our best resources. With our technology rollout, ACE schools received the technology first. We put them at the front of the line for resources—from infrastructure, to facilities, to staffing. Since the district now has such a laser focus on equity, schools are getting their needs met."

- Jolee Healey, ACE program director

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#4 Implement a tiered system of supports and autonomies for schools, based on performance and student needs. >> continued

Resource Shifts

People

To give school leaders more one-on-one support around instructional leadership and resource management, Dallas ISD increased the overall number of school supervisors to ensure groups of 6 – 15 schools that share a grade level are supported by one executive director (ED) and two dedicated instructional coaches. This lowered the average school support ratio in Dallas ISD to 10:1, compared with 16:1 in a typical district.25

Previously, EDs supported schools in a shared feeder pattern (a group of schools, spanning from elementary to secondary, in a shared attendance zone). This model built shared communities of students and ensured instructional continuity—however, it limited principals’ opportunities to receive instructional support and coaching that was customized to their specific grade levels and content needs. To address this, the district’s School Leadership Department created a “network-within-network” school support structure that bolstered instructional coaching while still maintaining the coherence of feeder patterns. Executive Director of the Northeast Secondary Network Richard Kastl shared, “Before, the executive director was from the high school all the way down to the elementary school. Now, we are in a triad, so we have two elementary executive directors over two separate feeder patterns, and then I’m in secondary over four feeder patterns. The three of us are part of a team, and we have our own dedicated deputy chief of school leadership to lead and support us.”26

The district linked larger “triad” networks to liaisons from each central office department to coordinate operational or specialized support needs, such as English-learner identification. Smaller shared-grade span networks came together for content-based instructional supports and received more dedicated on-site mentoring from their EDs and instructional coaches.

“I do a two-week coaching cycle. I have five high schools and six middle schools—so one week is middle school week, one week is high school week, and I use the additional time in my schedule to visit some of the campuses that have higher needs.

I go in and hear them out—‘What’s happening? What are some supports that you need from us?’

Then, I help them get those supports. I’m a thought partner at times too, to say, ‘Hey, this is where you’re headed and these are your resources, so what can we do to make the best decision for your students?’”

—Richard Kastl, executive director of the northeast secondary network27
Results: Changes to the Student Experience

During the 2017-18 school year, ACE schools and Transformation and Innovation schools served 22,700 Dallas ISD students, which is 14 percent of the district’s total enrollment. During the 2018-19 and 2019-20 school years, the district will launch seven more Transformation and Innovation schools.

Dallas ISD leadership interprets student performance improvement holistically; they see it as a combined outcome of the ACE initiative, the Public School Choice initiative, and concurrent investments in teacher compensation, pre-K expansion, college access, curriculum improvements, and more.

As a result of all of Dallas ISD’s strategic priorities, districtwide proficiency on the Texas assessment (the STAAR exam) between the 2013-14 school year and the 2017-18 school year increased from 27 percent to 40 percent in grades three through eight. This 13 percentage point increase means Dallas ISD is narrowing the student performance gap with the statewide average, which only saw an 8 percentage point increase during this time frame. In addition, average performance growth in Dallas ISD during this time period exceeded all local peer districts, despite the fact that Dallas ISD has the second-highest poverty level among similarly sized Texas districts.

Between the 2013-14 school year and the 2017-18 school year, Dallas ISD reduced the number of “Improvement Required” schools from 43 schools to 4 schools. This means that the number of students enrolled in an “Improvement Required” school has shrunk by 90 percent—from 23,500 students to 2,300 students. Of the 39 schools that transitioned out of “Improvement Required” status during this time period, 11 had launched one of the programs described in this case study (ACE, Transformation, Innovation, or a Magnet program). For more on Dallas ISD’s progress across all strategic initiatives during the last five years, see the recent State of the District presentation.

What’s Next for Dallas ISD?

In the coming years, Dallas ISD will continue to open additional open-enrollment schools, create opportunities for neighborhood schools to learn from Transformation and Innovation school approaches, and double down on efforts to ensure equitable access to high-quality, best-fit schools—especially for the district’s two current priority groups: ELL students and African-American secondary school students.
Dallas ISD increased teacher salary spending by $20 million during year one of the program by providing 5,712 teachers (roughly 70 percent of the workforce) a median compensation increase of $3,618. Dallas ISD projects that teacher salary spending will gradually increase over time to $30 million by the year 2020. 

Dallas ISD’s Department of Early Learning had a budget of $3 million in 2015-16, the first year of pre-K expansion. In 2017-18, the budget was $11 million. 


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Sources

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26 In-person interview with Executive Director of the Northeast Secondary Network Richard Kastl.

27 Ibid.


Note: Most of the content featured in this case study comes from interviews and email correspondence with Dallas ISD district and school leaders. Unless otherwise noted, all facts and data points are drawn from this qualitative data set.

Photos courtesy of Dallas Independent School District.

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Every school. Every child. Ready for tomorrow.