

Uvalde

High School

***Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District,
Uvalde, Texas***



UVALDE HIGH SCHOOL

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Uvalde, Texas

1998–1999 Data

Campus data	
Enrollment	1,346
Attendance rate	94.7%
Dropout rate	2.1%
Economically disadvantaged	53.6%
Mobility rate	18.8%
Limited proficiency in English	6.7%

Campus demographics	
African American	.2%
Asian/Pacific Islander	.4%
Hispanic	72.5%
Native American	0%
White	26.9%

District data	
Enrollment	5,293
Number of high schools	1
Economically disadvantaged	70.7%

Source: Texas Education Agency, Academic Excellence Indicator System, www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis

Selection Criteria: Performance on the Algebra I End-of-Course (EOC) Examination

General Criteria:

- District enrollment of 5,000 or more students
- Campus population of 40 percent or more economically disadvantaged students
- No selective academic entrance criteria
- Grades served: 9–12

Performance Criteria:

Uvalde High School was selected for participation in the study based on its students' performance on the Algebra I End-of-Course Examination in spring 1998 and spring 1999. Uvalde was one of only a handful of Title I high schools in Texas that met all of the following criteria:

- Texas accountability rating of Acceptable, Recognized, or Exemplary
- Spring 1998 Algebra I EOC exam passing scores for economically disadvantaged students that were above the state average for all students
- Spring 1999 Algebra I EOC exam passing scores for economically disadvantaged students that were above the state average for all students
- Spring 1998 Algebra I EOC exam participation rates greater than the state average (92.5 percent)
- Spring 1998 Algebra I EOC exam achievement gap in passing rates (between students who were economically disadvantaged and students who were not economically disadvantaged) of 7 percentage points or below

**Algebra I End-of-Course Examination scores
(spring 1998 and spring 1999)**

	Uvalde High School Economically Disadvantaged Students	All Texas High School Students
% passing in Spring 1998*	55%	21.3%
% passing in Spring 1999	52%	29.1%

Source: Texas Education Agency, www.tea.state.tx.us

*97% participation rate for all students

*7% achievement gap in passing rates (between students who were economically disadvantaged and students who were not economically disadvantaged)

UVALDE HIGH SCHOOL

The brightly colored murals in the halls of Uvalde High School greet visitors with reflections not only of great literature and notable events in science but also of the talent and vitality of the students who created them. The murals help tell the story of students and teachers who live and work in a culture that encourages learning. Located seventy miles from the United States–Mexico border, Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District covers 1,093 square miles in South Texas. In addition to educating students in Uvalde, the district serves students in three surrounding counties. With an economy based primarily on agriculture and mineral production, Uvalde is located south of the Texas Hill Country and north of the Rio Grande Valley, blending the terrain and culture of both geographical regions.

The large campus of Uvalde High School, recently expanded to include an auditorium, provides an orderly and disciplined environment that encourages student learning. Classrooms in the one-story building are laid out in blocks by subject matter and marked with student-designed murals in the halls. The library, centrally located in the school, provides a place for the tutoring and computers that are available to students before and after school and during the school day.

The high school was founded in 1891 and in 1998–99 had a senior class of 264 students. Of the 1,348 students enrolled for the 1999–2000 school year, 74.6 percent were Hispanic and 25 percent were white. The school's faculty consists of about 127 professional staff and seventeen educational aides. Over 56 percent of the students are economically disadvantaged.

Despite the challenges presented by the large number of students from economically disadvantaged families, Uvalde High School has experienced a series of successes in recent years. For the 1999–2000 school year, the school achieved a Recognized rating in the state accountability system.¹ For the 1997–98 school year, Uvalde was designated a Texas Blue Ribbon School² based on its overall school improvement efforts, and the percentage of Uvalde students who passed the Algebra I End-of-Course Examination exceeded the state average. These successes follow a period in which the district, Uvalde High School, and the communities they serve struggled to improve student performance.

In 1991–92 Uvalde Consolidated Independent School District was low-performing, and the performance of the high school was equally lackluster. The following year, a state accreditation team from the Texas Education Agency visited Uvalde to review school and district practices. The visit served as a wake-up call for the community and as a catalyst for improvement efforts districtwide. At the district level, one of the issues that administrators tackled was the organization of their schools. Since being placed under court-ordered desegregation in 1976,³ the five different elementary schools in Uvalde had served students by grade level from all over the district. This organization meant that students had to attend a different school every year from grades 2 through 6. The transitive nature of student enrollment in each school allowed little opportunity for students, parents, and teachers to develop relationships and build community. This lack of continuity necessary for sequential learning also contributed to a decline in academic achievement that affected students at all levels.

To address the decline in student achievement and community concerns, the district added bilingual parent liaisons to every campus in the 1992–93 school year, and the superintendent convened an advisory board called the Hispanic Ad Hoc Committee, providing them data on student performance

for analysis and recommendation. The ad hoc committee presented its findings to a federal court in the spring of 1995. On May 5, 1995, the court acted on the recommendation of the committee and rescinded the desegregation order. The district then restructured the elementary schools to serve neighborhood students in grades 1 through 4, with one campus designated exclusively for grades 5 and 6. With neighborhood schools in place, the district began to make progress in building community and improving instruction.

At the high school, the state's accreditation visit was accompanied by changes in school leadership, including a new principal and a new district curriculum director. Teachers, parents, and Campus Improvement Team⁴ members identified these changes as the starting points for improved academic achievement at the school and noted the importance of having “strong academic leadership”—something they continue to see at the school despite a change in principals (in the 1999–2000 school year).

Under the guidance of school leaders and backed by support from the district, the staff at Uvalde came together and worked as a team in their improvement efforts. School staff and CIT members at Uvalde implemented a number of processes and practices to improve student performance. They set clear goals for student achievement, beginning with improved performance in the Texas accountability system, and used data to inform programmatic, curricular, and instructional decisionmaking. Staff members worked together to implement a more rigorous curriculum and looked for ways to meet the academic needs of individual students through changes in instruction, class schedules, course offerings, and support programs. In addition, the staff at Uvalde took steps to handle safety, discipline, and attendance issues that were detracting from the school's educational mission. Throughout these changes, administrators were accessible and open to the suggestions and concerns of teachers, parents, and students, building an environment where teachers feel free to experiment with new ideas and where students are encouraged to build on their individual talents and interests.

SETTING CLEAR GOALS AND ESTABLISHING HIGH EXPECTATIONS

At Uvalde, school leaders and classroom teachers express high expectations for student achievement and view school improvement as a continuous process. Current principal Sara Bixler noted that high standards for students are fundamental: “I want the very best for my students . . . I always think we can do better.” Another teacher added detail to this campus vision by describing the staff's desire

. . . [t]o do the best we can to teach [the students], to give them the opportunities to reach their full potential, to give them the education they need so that when they go away from Uvalde High School they can make valid choices, so they can make informed choices.

To prepare students for a range of postsecondary options, the staff at Uvalde has, over the years, set a series of goals for student achievement and school improvement. These include higher performance on basic competency measures and expansion of advanced course offerings on campus.

Under the leadership of a new principal in the 1993–94 school year, the administration and faculty at Uvalde began to lay the foundation for school improvement. In concert with district and campus

leaders, the principal focused the school's energy and resources on the goal of raising the school's rating within the Texas accountability system. An area of particular weakness was the school's performance on the mathematics subtest of the TAAS.⁵ Campus leaders set improved performance on this particular exam as a schoolwide goal and a critical first step in the school's overall improvement efforts. To this end, they worked to align the curriculum and improve instruction.

With the focus on curriculum alignment and improved instruction beginning to result in improved TAAS scores, administrators and teachers set their sights on higher goals. They sent out teams of teachers, administrators, and parents to visit schools that were achieving on higher levels. After gathering information on strategies, the district and campus administration and faculty decided to concentrate their efforts on improving the passing rate on the Algebra I End-of-Course Examination⁶ rather than focusing primarily on the mathematics requirements of the TAAS. They deliberately chose the higher objective to better serve their students, knowing that the tenth-grade TAAS reflected only eighth-grade mathematics objectives. They were also confident that students who mastered the Algebra I curriculum would be successful on the TAAS.

Indeed, the improvement efforts of Uvalde staff resulted in consistent and sometimes dramatic upward movement in TAAS scores, exceeding the growth shown by both the state of Texas and the Uvalde district. Table 5 shows the improvement in TAAS scores from 1994 to 2000 for students at Uvalde High School.

Table 5: Uvalde students' TAAS passing rates (1994 to 2000)

	1994	1995	1996	1997	1998	1999	2000	Campus Change 1994–2000	District Change 1994–2000	State Change 1994–2000
Reading	65.9	64.1	69.3	78.5	89.9	84.2	89.3	+23.4	+13.8	+10.9
Math	38.8	44.4	46.2	60.5	75.8	72.8	88.3	+49.5	+35.7	+26.9
Writing	75.9	81.5	81.3	88.3	93.6	90.1	92.9	+17.0	+14.4	+9.2

Source: Texas Education Agency, Academic Excellence Indicator System, www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis

In addition to improving performance on TAAS and Algebra I EOC exams, the staff at Uvalde worked to increase the number of Advanced Placement courses offered and the number of students in the courses. The school began offering Advanced Placement courses in 1993, and the number of course offerings has grown every year, with a total of seventeen AP and Pre-AP classes available in 1999–2000. Administration, faculty, and parents welcomed the emphasis on AP. A member of the Campus Improvement Team explained:

We needed something else for some of our GT [Gifted and Talented] students and for some of our honor students. . . . We went to the GT conference and we looked at the College Board's program and . . . we decided what we thought would best serve our students. . . . [W]e went and found out where we could do the training and [how to get] the textbooks. We brought it to the [CIT].

The implementation of AP classes has expanded opportunities for students to excel. In the 1998–99 school year, the high school had six AP scholar award winners. The award is presented to students who take multiple AP tests and earn high scores. One parent commented, “Our science division chairman . . . pushes a lot of these students into taking their AP exams. She not just pushes them, she prepares them well, to where they come out scoring well enough to get these honors.” A student described AP classes as “pretty new. . . . During the time that I’ve been here they’ve been adding more and more . . . and getting better at them.”

The school has also played a role in educating many parents about AP classes. One teacher described the progress made over time:

We’re beginning to finally make our parents . . . aware of the difficulty of our AP classes and what’s expected of students. . . . [At first] the expectations were extremely high and the students weren’t used to having to meet those and parents weren’t used to having to deal with that.

Some have seen a shift in how parents now support the focus on high expectations with “What do I need to do? What do I need to get for my student?” rather than, “Why are you expecting so much of my child?”

USING DATA TO GUIDE INSTRUCTION

The district has supported the school’s improvement efforts by helping school staff gather, analyze, and use data to inform decisionmaking. The district office helps the school by reporting information about discipline referrals and attendance rates and by analyzing the results of benchmark assessments every six weeks. These assessments measure student progress on TAAS and EOC exam objectives. The district curriculum and instruction director provides this data—which is disaggregated to show student progress by teacher, by grade level, and by subject—to the principal and the Campus Improvement Team to help them assess student achievement and make effective decisions for improvement. The director described her role as a “resource person” to the campus. She wanted to allow school leaders to spend what little time they have “making a decision rather than trying to collect the data.” She described the importance of student performance data in meeting the needs of individual students:

So, we’ve really had to go deep into each of us and claim every child and find them. Here’s a “statistic” over here that’s doing real well: who is he and how can we find him and hook him up with the right people? And that’s what the campus teams have been all about. At central office we’ve got data, but they’re down there [at the school] finding the kid and finding solutions.

In addition to using quantitative data from the district office, administrators on campus often gather

and use other types of data for decisionmaking. For example, Principal Bixler requested that teachers turn in a list of individual students who were failing and the reasons why each of these students was experiencing difficulty in class. Similarly, one assistant principal set up folders containing information gathered from learning styles tests, self-esteem tests, and other pertinent data that identified the individual needs of students to be served by a new mentoring program. This same assistant principal advocates the use of learning style inventories as a means of determining individual student needs.

Another assistant principal described the assessment of students and their needs as a combination of formal and informal processes, using quantitative data from the district along with data gathered from observations or interviews, such as discussions with parents and faculty members. The principal described this informal assessment process:

When we're having our little group meetings—which may be in the teacher's lounge, it may be in the library, it may be in the hall—we'll talk about someone who's really made a turnaround in his or her academic program and why that one has been successful and this other one has not.

Combined with data from the district, this process provides a continuum of information that teachers and staff use to identify individual student needs and plan educational strategies.

FOCUSING ON INSTRUCTION AND INDIVIDUAL LEARNING

The staff at Uvalde have taken several steps toward academic improvement. Using in-house content-area teams and skills learned through professional development trainings, teachers and administrators have explored ways to improve curriculum and instruction. These efforts were initially focused on particular subjects, such as Algebra I, but have expanded to departments beyond mathematics. In addition, the staff at Uvalde developed comprehensive systems for student support and early intervention as well as for discipline and attendance. Common to these changes was a no-excuses approach to student learning and a focus on meeting the individual needs of students.

Taking Steps Toward Academic Improvement

The improvement at Uvalde High School required a team effort. Administrators and teachers, supported by the district, worked together to implement the more rigorous curriculum and to improve instruction so that students could be successful. One example of this process of change can be seen in the steps taken by the mathematics department to improve student achievement in Algebra I, as measured by the Algebra I EOC exam. The Algebra I EOC exam measures how well students understand the mathematical concepts set forth in the Texas state curriculum guidelines (known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS⁷) for Algebra I. In 1997, Algebra I became the first high school-level mathematics course that Texas students must take in order to graduate. Thus, mastery of Algebra I is a critical task for Texas students.

After attending professional development training in mathematics, the staff began exploring changes that could affect student performance in Algebra I. The mathematics faculty created their own curriculum that introduced functions; these included real-life applications with mathematics that

interest and motivate students. The curriculum was designed not only to improve scores on the Algebra I EOC exam, but also to prepare students for Geometry, Algebra II, advanced science courses, and ultimately, college-level work. Faculty members explained that they adopted approaches from several different resources rather than relying solely on the textbook for Algebra I.

Rather than spending classroom time reviewing material learned in previous years, the teachers decided to begin each course with new material. Students who needed review could receive extra assistance outside of class through an extensive tutoring program implemented at the same time. Algebra I teachers are available to tutor their students in the library every day during the STAR period.⁸ Mathematics tutoring is also available to students until 8:00 p.m. on Tuesdays and Thursdays, as well as immediately before and after school every weekday. In the classroom, the teachers implemented department-wide exams for consistency and incorporated the use of calculators to better prepare students for the Algebra I EOC exam.

The mathematics faculty built a strong, well-trained team that works collaboratively in planning for instruction. To support this process, the campus has allotted a common planning time for Algebra I teachers and the resources necessary for ongoing professional development. For example, all mathematics teachers attend the Algebra I TEXTEAMS Institute⁹ to learn how to align instruction so that the students learn mathematics concepts sequentially. The emphasis for the entire faculty, as described by the mathematics department chair, is on “constant staff development and realizing you’re never going to be through.” Newer teachers pointed out the advantages of working in a strong mathematics department, with teamwork and trust built up over time. The team’s work is reinforced by teachers in other academic areas; for example, in the career and technology program, teachers used “hands-on” mathematics as they built the new agricultural barn.

The district and campus provided several strong incentives to teachers to support the focus on Algebra I: extra pay and small class size, with a limit of eighteen students per Algebra I class. Recognizing the need for extended time for Algebra I, the campus also extended these classes to ninety minutes every day.

After several years of success in improving their Algebra I EOC passing rates, the campus instituted a requirement that students pass the exam in order to be classified as a sophomore. The decision to require Uvalde students to pass the Algebra I EOC exam in their freshman year was not without its challenges, among them the reaction of students. Principal Sarah Bixler describes the reaction of many students to this change:

For those [students whose] older brothers and sisters had [taken lower-level classes] it has really been a shock, because they have to focus on algebra, and it’s taken us awhile to work through that, and that’s one reason we’re spending so much time and money on mathematics training.

Implementing Support Programs

In order to support student success with the more rigorous coursework, the staff developed systems for student support and early intervention. These systems were designed to identify each student’s current level of achievement and to address areas where students are experiencing difficulty. In addition to tutoring, available to students not only during the school day but also three nights a week at the

library, the high school implemented specific programs aimed at preventing academic problems and intervening early when problems do occur. Counseling and mentoring programs are available to assist students who are experiencing challenges that might result not only in academic failure but also in students leaving school without earning a diploma.

One of the school's prevention strategies is a class called *Preparing All Students for Success*, required for all ninth graders. This course, which may be taken the summer before students enter the school or during the first fall semester, helps students develop study skills, learn conflict resolution strategies, investigate career options, and plan for their four years of high school. The high school faculty spent a year developing the curriculum for this class and continues to revise the notebook of class activities.

The Student Tutorials and Rewards (STAR) program serves both a prevention and an intervention function by giving students time during the school day to complete homework and get tutoring. The STAR program provides a fifty-minute period each day during which students with a grade point average of C or below are required to work on their homework with the option of receiving tutoring from any of their teachers. During this class period (structured like homeroom), teachers are responsible for classrooms of students; however, instruction takes place only upon the request of students for individual tutoring. This class period supplements other opportunities for tutoring, such as the half-hour study hall that accompanies athletics classes and the tutoring available in the library three nights a week.

The Fresh Start program is most specifically aimed at intervention, targeting students who have failed six weeks of a core subject. By attending classes after school (five hours a week), students can retake the first six weeks of the course and earn a passing grade. Likewise, students who fail the second six weeks can retake the class on Saturdays (five hours) and achieve a passing grade. Faculty who teach Fresh Start strive to present the material in ways that will appeal to a broad range of learners.

In addition to these measures to support students who are struggling to succeed, the school is experimenting with a new campus-developed mentoring program and has expanded its counseling services to provide four grade-level counselors. The mentoring program connects struggling students with a mentor-teacher who provides direction and guidance and has been successful in recovering students on the verge of dropping out. One teacher described the mentoring of a nineteen-year-old student who was ready to drop out of school after his twin brother graduated:

[The mentor] mothered him in a good way. She was firm and stood behind him and they discussed and they talked, and that was his safe haven. . . . He knew he could always go to her and stay out of trouble and he did. . . . He stayed with her and he graduated and now he comes back and he visits her.

At times, a student may be recovered through a combination of strategies over a period of time, as one teacher described:

I had a student who . . . got all her credits but did not graduate because of the TAAS. And there were about two years that she did not come for tutoring during the summer, but then she decided she wanted to [graduate] . . . and then she got involved with the migrant program and attended the student summer tutorial just for the TAAS. . . . [S]he should have graduated,

and six years later she finally graduated . . . and she was excited because she now could get real credit at the junior college.

As a counselor emphasized, “We never give up on them. I will never throw my hands up in the air and say, ‘I’m sorry. I’ve done all I can,’ and forget you. . . . I keep trying and I keep trying until we find something [that works for that student].”

More than one faculty member described the students as “wonderful” or “really good kids” who benefit from the intense efforts that support them in managing personal problems and improving their academic performance.

Providing a Safe and Orderly Environment

In addition to implementing systems of early support and intervention, high school staff have worked to build and maintain a campus environment conducive to learning—an environment where issues of safety, discipline, and attendance don’t detract from the school’s central mission. Administrators, teachers, and parents attribute the school’s current safe and orderly atmosphere to policies and procedures that the school has implemented in recent years. However, these changes haven’t come without a concerted and sometimes controversial effort.

About four or five years ago, gang involvement and on-campus fighting were problems for the school. According to an assistant principal, about 100 students were involved, to varying degrees, in gang activities. Members of some groups would “tag” the walls, lockers, and their books with gang symbols. As the assistant principal for discipline described, the school took action to address this issue:

We created a list of the kids that had been involved in the gangs in the past . . . [identifying kids] currently on our campus and kids that were no longer on our campus, and each of the assistant principals got a copy of that [and] a copy of the different taggings that the gangs would do. [Then] we hit them hard. Our policy was that the first time that it happened, we warned them . . . [without] discipline consequence. Kids would come to the office [and] we would say, “Okay, here’s your warning. You’ve come into my office for gang activity. We’re going to go to your locker, we’re going to pull out every sheet of paper that has any kind of gang activity on it, we’re going to throw it away. We’re going to clear out your backpack, we’re going to clear everything out, so that the next time you do it, [we] know it’s because you want to do it, and you’re going to be disciplined for that.”

School administrators also educated teachers about gang activities on campus and called the parents of students who wore or displayed gang tags or colors.

In addition to addressing gang activities on campus, the school also implemented a dress code, a code of conduct, and tighter discipline procedures, including stricter enforcement of its tardy policy. One teacher noted, “When I first started, there were a lot of [tardies]. Then we got this new tardy policy and it’s really changed that.” Students are considered tardy if they aren’t in their assigned seats when the tardy bell rings. All tardies translate into detention time for students. As one of the assistant principals explained, the tardy policy has evolved over time:

We've been doing this [tardy enforcement] for about three or four years. It's gotten better every year because the kids know what to expect. At first they didn't mind being tardy but then they got tired of having to spend that thirty extra minutes [in detention. . . . Then they just start to realize that "maybe that five or ten seconds that I was hanging out in the hall isn't worth spending thirty minutes in a D-hall." I think that it's really helped. Like I said, for 1,400 students, five, or six, or sometimes zero tardies is pretty good.

In the fall of 1999, school security was increased at Uvalde High School in the wake of national concern for school safety. Because there had been several incidents at the school where people from outside the school were able to walk onto campus and mingle with students, entrance to the campus was limited to the front door. In addition, all school personnel and students were required to wear identification tags, as a means of keeping the campus "open" and yet safe.

The school's efforts to build a safe and orderly environment for learning are deemed by most of the faculty as an essential step in its overall transition toward academic success. As one assistant principal noted, "Students can focus on learning, and that's what they're here for." Many parents and community members of Uvalde also supported these efforts. "Our school demands discipline," explained one parent. "We won't tolerate anything less. . . . I think that may be one of the things that has made the big difference in this transition process." Some students, however, expressed concern that there were "too many rules" and that the new dress code and the code of conduct rules might lead to the alienation of some students. Teachers and administrators acknowledged these concerns and the need to balance safety and behavior issues with steps to ensure that the school remains a welcoming place. The discussion continues as the policies implemented in the 1999–2000 school year are revisited and refined.

Focusing on the Whole Student

The success of the improvements at Uvalde High School reflects a focus on the whole student, with the goal of meeting each student's individual needs. This focus on individual student needs at Uvalde High School is reflected in one teacher's statement: "I think we teach students, we don't teach classes."

Campus and district leaders are committed to working with all students and have allocated the resources necessary for individualized instruction; however, it is each teacher's acceptance and understanding of different levels of achievement that makes this strategy effective. One teacher explained:

The [students] are so varied. . . . They may come from homes where their parents don't speak English, or we have many, many migrant students that come in to us a little bit late and leave us early. I think that's one of the things that I like about working here so much is there is such a variety . . . it's more of a challenge. Meeting them where they are, realizing that a language barrier has nothing to do with intelligence, and helping them over that hill.

A school counselor also verified this willingness to work with individual student needs and try different approaches until something is effective:

We are truly interested in helping all students achieve their potential. We do work with not only those that are just going to take off and go . . . but we also have hope for the ones that are down there that just sometimes get in a little rut and they can't get out of that rut. But we can kind of always offer them that helping hand that will pull them up. . . . I think there's always something in that student, some good stuff that all you have to do is find it and pull it out and work with it.

This understanding of individual student needs translates into varied methods of instruction based on different learning styles. Most teachers at the high school provide opportunities for students to receive one-on-one help through the STAR program and other methods of delivering individual tutoring.

Students in the high school are aware that their teachers and administrators are available to tutor them outside the regular classroom day and that they have access to administrators, particularly the principal, if they want to discuss issues. The principal recognizes the value of greeting students in the hall and calling them by name, and she enjoys "the fact that students and teachers feel that they can come into my office." One student, describing the availability of his precalculus teacher, said, "In the morning if you need help, she'll be [in the classroom] regardless of you saying something to her or not." Another student talked about how the individualized support provided by teachers has made a "big difference" in student test scores in mathematics. Other students described the assistance they received from each other as well. For example, some students who wanted to prepare for the AP exams organized study groups. Teachers are available to assist such students upon request.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS AND ENHANCING COLLABORATION

Teachers at Uvalde high school talked about the accessibility, openness, and flexibility of administrators on campus and were quick to acknowledge the positive effect this support had on their teaching and educational teamwork. Administrators at the school and the district make themselves available to teachers, students, and parents and provide them with formal and informal opportunities to communicate suggestions or concerns. They also use shared professional development, common subject area planning periods, and departmental structures to enhance collaboration around the goals of the campus, thus building strong educational teams. District leadership has supported this work through staffing and budgetary decisions and through fundraising initiatives geared toward the needs of the campus.

Maintaining Opportunities for Communication

Accessibility, from the superintendent on down to individual classroom teachers, contributes to the open communication among administrators, teachers, and community members at Uvalde High School. The superintendent has an open-door policy that begins early in the morning (5:30 a.m.) and allows community members and principals to visit him without making an appointment. He explained,

I feel like it's helpful to listen to people, . . . because if they have concerns then they're your concerns, and . . . you can tell pretty soon if it's sincere and if it's really a concern that needs to be

addressed. And more times than not most of them do [need to be addressed].

This high level of accessibility extends to other staff in the district office and facilitates informal communication between district and campus personnel. The district director for curriculum and instruction, for example, talked about the many ways that campus staff contact her for support: “They pick up the phone, they call me at home. They’ll drop by central office and talk to me about it, or [we’ll meet] here on campus.”

Like administrators at the district office, the leaders at Uvalde also make themselves accessible to staff and students on campus. All of the faculty members interviewed at Uvalde reported feeling free to go into the principal’s office with a concern, knowing that they would be heard. One teacher emphasized how this was true for all administrators on campus:

I don’t ever feel that I can’t go in, share my thoughts on something—even if it’s something I’m not happy with—and not be listened to, and not be respected. I feel like I can go to any of them and get answers that I need.

The same type of informal communication often occurs between parents, members of the community, and school staff.

Several teachers report making contact and having informal conferences with parents at the grocery store. One teacher noted that “the kids call us at home. The parents do, the kids do.” In addition to these informal methods of communication with parents, the school has taken some deliberate steps to keep parents informed about what happens on campus. For instance, the principal began sending a newsletter to parents to keep them informed of important events. Because some parents are reluctant to come to the school, she is trying to change the image of the school for them. She said,

I like to get across to parents that all schools are not like what they were involved with: “Give us a chance to show you and your student that we’re different, that we are interested in your child’s success. We want your child to be successful no matter what it takes.”

Although she encourages parents to meet with her when they have a concern about classroom events, she also supports teachers by making sure that the concern is discussed with the teacher.

One place where the open communication between school staff and community members is apparent is on the Campus Improvement Team, or CIT. A member of the committee described how the team functions:

We have an opportunity to express our feelings very openly with each other and at the highest level. . . . I’m sure everyone here feels that at least they have an opportunity to express their goals and their directions, and you know, sometimes we clash. Not violently, but sometimes we clash. But we always, to my knowledge, have reached consensus on which way we’re going to go on something.

Perhaps because of the openness and accessibility of school and district leaders, the staff at Uvalde and members of their CIT feel free to experiment with ideas and try new approaches without fear of

failure. When failures do occur, or new approaches do not achieve the intended outcomes, the staff does not hesitate in revisiting and revising the program or activity. Teachers report that their ideas for change and improvement are usually taken directly to the principal, who then adapts or modifies the idea as necessary or takes it to the CIT for consideration. This practice extends to parents as well. One parent acknowledged the school's responsiveness to her suggestions regarding her son's education:

The school has always been very receptive. Any idea you just throw at them, they have always given the students, the parents, the chance to explore, then try [it]. They are willing to go a step ahead and [make] whatever changes.

Developing Strong Educational Teams

In addition to providing opportunities for communication, administrators at Uvalde have tried to encourage teamwork around the school's goals for student achievement. For example, they support shared professional development and common content-area planning periods, where teachers can explore successful instructional strategies and classroom resources. According to teachers, the school's department heads played a significant role in promoting instructional teamwork on campus.

In the area of professional development, for example, teachers receive both general and subject-specific training. For example, all teachers are trained in Cooperative Discipline (a discipline management program) with two facilitators on the campus to assist teachers. Academic area training such as TEXTEAMS and the New Jersey Writing Project promote shared instructional activities. Moreover, teachers new to Uvalde High School are given a mentor-teacher who helps them with the adjustment to campus.

In addition, the staff at Uvalde implemented content-area planning meetings to help teachers plan their curriculum and develop instructional strategies for the school year. At these meetings, teachers of the same content area set benchmarks for student achievement based on individual and student group data, discuss progress toward these goals, and share instructional strategies that have proven effective. This collaboration has led not only to increased consistency from classroom to classroom but to the development of stronger educational teams. The first content-area team implemented was in mathematics. Based in large part on the mathematics department's success in improving Algebra I EOC exam passing rates, content-area teams have been formed in other departments.

According to teachers, the department heads at Uvalde have enhanced the effectiveness of the school's content-area teams and of teachers, in general. They support teachers with resources they need to improve instruction and share their expertise in ways that encourage open communication and sharing. As one teacher said about her department head, "She's very knowledgeable and in a pleasant way. She dispenses information more like she's an equal."

Perhaps because of the steady and open flow of communication on the campus, teachers report a high level of camaraderie at Uvalde High School. The traditional rivalry sometimes found between departments has been replaced with a spirit of cooperation. An example of this is the way that other departments have responded to the concentration of resources on algebra classes. While such an emphasis might cause conflict and resentment on some campuses, this has not been the case at Uvalde. One mathematics teacher described how teachers in other departments have expressed

support for their work:

I have never had anybody in any other subject matter do anything but support everything [we do]. Because they all use mathematics, and anything we can do to get our kids in better shape mathematically is going to help them, too. . . . We really get along here. We really like each other. We pull together.

Providing Support at the District Level

The staff and administration at Uvalde recognize that their school improvement efforts have been enhanced by support from the district. District leaders have supported their work through staffing and budgetary decisions and through fundraising initiatives focused on the needs of the campus.

The district leadership changed when John Harrell became the superintendent in the 1992–93 school year. One of his first actions was to reduce the size of the district office from nine administrators to four. Five administrators were moved to the schools, sending the message “that the campuses were more important than central office.” By serving as business manager and personnel director as well as superintendent for three years, Harrell kept administrative costs down. He also saved himself “a lot of headaches” by insisting on “capable and adequate staffing” that can solve problems at the campus level.

Superintendent Harrell’s approach to leadership is based on strong recognition and respect for the work of campus principals and site-based decisionmaking teams. He described the key to success on any campus as “that principal and how well they can work with their staff.” In addition to reducing the size of the district office, Harrell did not renew the contracts of three principals who were not performing effectively. Because teachers “know so much, what’s going on, what needs to be done, and parents do, too,” Harrell always relies on the input of site-based teams and other committees, especially in the area of hiring new staff. Campus committees are responsible for conducting interviews of all potential candidates, with the superintendent taking the committees’ recommendations to the Board of Trustees.

The superintendent also provides consistent support in the dedication of resources needed by campuses. He instituted annual pay raises for teachers, as well as a compensation package for all employees—both professional and nonprofessional. In addition, he specified to the new business manager and to principals that teachers should never be denied what they need in the classroom. In order to support the cost of improvement initiatives, Superintendent Harrell hired two assistant superintendents for instruction whose responsibilities included grant writing. These two assistants brought in over a million dollars in grants in just five years, providing funding for the improvement initiatives. The remarkable unity between the district and campus leaders has sustained the direction of academic improvement at the high school and promises to continue the momentum in other areas as well.

FOSTERING AN ENVIRONMENT OF RESPECT AND AFFECTION FOR STUDENTS

In visiting the campus, researchers were struck by what one teacher referred to as the strong “sense of family” on campus. This same teacher explained that what she most appreciated about the school was “the harmony that lives here.” This harmony is evident in the way teachers and administrators interact with students in the classrooms, the hallways, and outside school buildings. Likewise, student interactions were also reported as harmonious. One student noted that “pretty much everybody gets along,” creating “a really relaxed atmosphere.” This student described the advantage of such an environment:

[It] makes it a lot easier to learn because too many times I think kids are worried about what somebody else [thinks], and the distraction is not there [for us].

While some students attributed this environment to the fact that Uvalde is a relatively small community where students may have known each other for years, staff at the school also worked to create this environment. Administrators and teachers make themselves available to students to discuss academic as well as other concerns and have developed programs that encourage student creativity and enjoyment of learning. In addition, staff recognize the importance of student involvement in extracurricular activities and make an effort to get to know students and their interests.

Encouraging Student Creativity and Enjoyment of Learning

Uvalde High School offers many opportunities for students to pursue their talents and interests, giving them the freedom to learn in various ways. Just as the faculty feels free to experiment in their teaching, Uvalde students feel free to experiment in their learning. Two visible examples of classes that promote creativity and enjoyment of learning are broadcast journalism, where students produce a daily news show, and art, where advanced students design and paint murals that decorate the school’s hallways.

Each morning, students at Uvalde High School broadcast a live daily show called “Coyote Country News.” Students in the broadcast journalism class plan, film, edit, and present each day’s newscast. Under the guidance of the class teacher, they decide what topics they want to cover, write their own news scripts, and conduct interviews with students and school staff. They also do all of the video editing and special effects. Students participating in the newscast were emphatic about how much they enjoy the class and the freedom it allows. Students talked about one piece, in particular, where they were able to express student concerns with the school’s tardy policy. The broadcast, called “The Tardy Project,” was a satirical piece on the punishment for students who were late to class. It was designed as a parody of the then-popular film, *The Blair Witch Project*. Broadcast at a time of tension over the school’s attendance policies, the piece had a cathartic effect. Students and teachers alike appreciated the humor in it.

Like broadcast journalism, the art program offers students a chance to express themselves. Students, teachers, and administrators are most proud of the student murals that animate the school’s academic wings. Advanced students in art are given a lot of freedom in development of the murals. Under the guidance of a teacher, students design a prototype of the mural that they would like to paint and present it to the administration for their approval. Once the design is approved, numerous students

implement the piece. One sign of the relaxed and open relationship between faculty and staff on campus is the inclusion of images of teachers in the murals. In one mural, for example, a well-known teacher is depicted as one of the witches from the opening scene of *Macbeth*. Researchers observed students intently painting a new mural for the social studies hall; their enjoyment of the work was readily apparent.

Recognizing the Importance of Extracurricular Activities

Involvement in extracurricular activities is also emphasized at Uvalde High School. A teacher described the value of Reserve Officers Training Core (ROTC):

[ROTC has] taken some of the students who would not otherwise be successful and . . . given them a focus, or an ownership of school so that they learn manners, they learn a lot of other things, not about ROTC but about becoming a good citizen. About being responsible and being accountable.

Some faculty members noted the importance of balancing extracurricular activities with academic performance so students are “well-rounded” individuals. Students also recognized the importance of extracurricular involvement. One student asserted that “almost every student is involved in at least one thing,” and another student agreed that “a lot of students get involved, and that’s really good.”

Principal Bixler believes that the involvement of teachers in extracurricular activities also improves success in the classroom. She stated,

I’ve noticed through the years that high school teachers who go to football games, band concerts, basketball games, drama presentations, whatever, don’t seem to have the problems in the classroom that those who don’t [go have], because students see us as real human beings. They can see that we get annoyed with the referee when he makes a bad call even though we try to control ourselves.

An echo of this statement is found in one teacher’s belief that attending school activities helps teachers claim all students as “our kids.” While recognizing that tutoring students and attending extracurricular activities takes time, many teachers commented that it was time well spent. They find teaching more rewarding because of the connections they feel to the students and the community. In fact, the department heads at Uvalde noted that the teachers who are most successful at their school are the ones that “have a heart in their kids.” Teaching the subject matter isn’t enough. Instead, as one department chair stated,

[You are more successful] when you know something about what they’re up to. You can connect with [them]—you know something beyond the classroom, their interests, the fact that they’re working or not working, why they’re working, something about them.

PLANS FOR CONTINUING IMPROVEMENT

In the 1999–2000 school year, Uvalde High School achieved Recognized status for the first time. Although proud of their accomplishments, the administrators and teachers at the school realize that their school improvement process is never over.

The school is refining its policies and practices based on input from teachers and students, as well as parents and the community. For example, school staff are addressing the controversy created by the new dress code and student attendance policy. Because some students felt the new requirement to wear identification cards along with other dress code mandates had created a restrictive environment, students are now required only to have the card in their possession and to show it upon request. Staff members were concerned about students missing classroom instruction because of In-School Suspension (ISS) as a result of not serving detention for tardies. To address this concern, certified teachers have been hired to provide academic assistance to students in ISS. Staff have also provided students with additional opportunities to serve the detention time, such as during the lunch hour.

In order to continue the progress begun, the district and campus have identified new goals aligned with the school's vision. One goal identified by the principal of Uvalde High School is to focus on the needs of incoming freshmen in order to provide support for academic achievement and reduce the risk of dropout. Since the smaller Algebra I classes have been successful in improving EOC exam scores, the principal plans to reduce the size of ninth-grade English I classes to fifteen to eighteen students. In addition, staff have implemented measures to decrease absenteeism among freshman students. These measures include dedicating a staff member to call parents immediately after a student has been reported absent. Another goal identified by staff at the school is to increase the number of students who take AP tests and the number of students who pass the AP tests, enabling them to receive college course credit. They also see the need to make their AP classes more representative of their student population; in particular they would like to see an increase in the number of Hispanic students who take AP classes and master the tests.

In addition, several teachers and department heads have identified the need for all teachers to use student-centered instructional strategies. They cited staff development and assistance opportunities offered by the regional education center as one means to achieve this goal; in addition, they talked about the value of learning from the success of others. The principal also noted that administrators have been trained to conduct classroom “walkthroughs” and to provide immediate feedback to teachers on instructional strategies. In these and other ways, staff at Uvalde plan to continue to improve instruction on campus.

ENDNOTES

- ¹ As part of the Texas public school accountability system, each school receives an annual rating that takes into consideration their students' performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) and the school's dropout rate. Among other things, a Recognized rating means that at least 80 percent of the students who took the TAAS passed all core subject areas—that is, reading, writing, and mathematics. In addition, it means that at least 80 percent of each ethnic group and 80 percent of students identified as economically disadvantaged passed each subject area test.
- ² The Texas Blue Ribbon School award, sponsored by the United States Department of Education, was implemented to encourage school improvement. Schools must apply for the awards that are decided on the basis of merit as discerned by a panel of reviewers.
- ³ In April 1969, Mexican-American students at the high school staged a walkout, protesting unfair treatment by teachers and administrators. As problems in the school system became more publicized, the district was placed under court-ordered desegregation in 1976.
- ⁴ Beginning in 1992, the Texas legislature required all campuses to develop school-based management teams that include administrators, classroom teachers, campus staff, community members, and parents. At Uvalde, this team is called the Campus Improvement Team, or CIT.
- ⁵ The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) is a criterion-referenced test given to students in grades 3 through 8 and grade 10. The test is administered during the spring semester of each school year. In grade 10, the test measures student achievement in reading, writing, and mathematics. The grade 10 test is known as the exit-level test; students are required to pass it in order to qualify for graduation from high school.
- ⁶ End-of-course examinations measure student learning in certain high school courses—Algebra I, Biology, English II, and U.S. History. Specifically, the Algebra I EOC exam measures how well students understand the mathematical concepts set forth in the Texas state curriculum standards (known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS) for Algebra I.
- ⁷ The Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS, are curriculum guidelines set by the state of Texas. They articulate what over four million Texas children must know and be able to do in each subject area (mathematics, English language arts and reading, and so on).
- ⁸ The STAR period is described in the next section.
- ⁹ TEXTEAMS professional development experiences provide educators with a foundation for teaching students content aligned with the mathematics and science Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills.

