Aldine: A Study of Success

An Honors Thesis (HONR 499)

By

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Abstract

Education is a vital part of society; however, not all education is equal. Research has shown that students from low socioeconomic backgrounds are much less likely to graduate from high school (Balfanz, et al.). Due to this discrepancy, those involved in education are constantly trying to find new ways to adapt their teaching to fit the needs of their students and help them succeed. One of the more successful urban school districts is Aldine ISD. About 80% of the students in Aldine are considered socioeconomically disadvantaged, and yet the class of 2011 had only 14.5% of students drop out (Texas Education Agency). The school district's success appears to be based on several factors, including staff development, dedication to improvement of test scores and student performance, and community involvement. I explored these and other factors that play into Aldine's success to discover what they are doing right, and how others can apply it to their own teaching.
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Author's Statement

The purpose of this piece is to explore various factors that play into the success of students within a school district. I created this written document through research on the district, notes from seminars I attended, and my own observations during my time in Aldine as a student teacher. I am very passionate about education, and I am constantly searching for new ways to reach my students. I wrote this paper with the hope of uncovering factors of education that can be applied not only in my classroom, but also in other schools and situations.
Introduction

Education is the corner stone to our society; without the ability to learn from people and experiences, we would become stagnant, ignorant, and intolerant. Education provides us with an escape of sorts – it gives us the tools to grow and move forward from past mistakes, and creates opportunities to break the molds of society. As such, members of society who are involved in educating others take the responsibility very seriously and are constantly searching for more effective ways to engage and educate students, both academically and socially.

As a new teacher, I have found myself wondering what factors create a learning environment that is most effective for students. It is well known there is a correlation between student achievement and socioeconomic status – a student who comes from a low-income home is less likely graduate than a student from a financially stable home (Balfanz et al.). A 2013 study by an organization called America’s Promise Alliance found that “for students from low-income families, graduation rates are at 66 percent or less...” (Balfanz et al.). However, this statistic does not apply to all low-income school districts. Aldine Independent School District, located in Houston, Texas, serves over 63,000 students, 80 percent of which are considered low-income (“Aldine ISD Fast Facts”). In theory, this district should be seeing about 50 percent of students graduating successfully. However, according to their Academic Excellence Indicator System, or AEIS Report, 80% of students graduated, 0.8% received their GED, and 4.5% continued high school. Only 14.7% of students in the class of 2011 dropped out (Texas Education Agency). As an educator, I look at these statistics and wonder what the district is doing right and how others can apply it to their teaching or to their school district.

I had an opportunity to learn more about Aldine ISD in the spring of 2013, when I traveled to the district to complete my student teaching. I attended a variety of seminars about Aldine throughout the course of the semester, and from them I learned about the different programs they offer, their expectations for students and staff, the hierarchy of the district, and other information. I also had the opportunity
to work within a school in Aldine and see for myself some of the methods used to create effective, engaging learning environments.

At the very first seminar I attended in Aldine as a student teacher, I was introduced to the vision, mission, and core beliefs of the district. We were presented with a handout from the website that numerated the commitments and core beliefs of the district.

1. We believe each student can learn at or above grade level and will have equal opportunity to do so.
2. We believe Aldine ISD can achieve higher levels of performance through clearly defined goals that set high expectations for student achievement.
3. We believe in the value of parents as the first and best teachers and that the community must actively participate in the development of all children.
4. We believe in the value of each employee, in his/her personal and professional growth, and in empowering each one to be accountable to make decisions aligned with the vision of the school district.
5. We believe all environments should be supportive, safe, and secure.

("Aldine ISD Mission Statement")

I believe that these core beliefs and commitments are the backbone to the success of Aldine ISD.

**Student Achievement**

The first belief listed, that "we believe each student can learn at or above grade level and will have equal opportunity to do so" is first for a reason. Everything that Aldine does is for their students. Even the district mission, "Producing the Nation's Best" ("Aldine ISD Mission Statement") indicates that Aldine strives for student achievement. However, the question then forms - how is student achievement measured?

From my own observations, student achievement is measured almost entirely through the quarterly benchmark exams and the state standardized test - the STAAR test. There is a heavy emphasis on standardized testing in the district, which often made it feel as though I was teaching to the test. My students were not part of the STAAR testing, as I taught 2nd grade; however, they did take the benchmark exams. These exams count as a major, or test, grade for students and are used to track the student's progress. The tests cover material from the previous quarter; as a result, I noticed many teachers spending more time on reviewing old
material that may be on the test, rather than addressing new material, or material that wouldn't be tested. I found the benchmarks to be both a hindrance and a blessing – they gave me a good indication of how well my students knew the material, but also limited what I could teach.

The STAAR test was far more intense than the benchmarks. Students in my school prepped for the test for weeks; on practice test days, the entire school would be on lockdown, meaning no one in the halls or out of their classrooms. Teachers were not allowed to walk their students past the 3rd and 4th grade classrooms, but rather were required to take them outside, around the building to their destination. There were many incentives for students taking the STAAR test as well: pizza parties, ice cream, free time, and many other options were available to students who performed well on the exam. In my school, we even had a parade to help motivate the students taking the exam. Teachers seemed to spend the majority of their time in the spring semester teaching to the test, and while it may have improved test scores, it doesn't demonstrate the true extent of a student's education. However, the test results do provide good information about certain aspects of a student's education. The data gained from the STAAR tests indicates areas where a student may be struggling and gives the student opportunities to receive more individualized instruction, leading to a higher student success rate in the district.

**District Improvement**

Aldine also makes a point to create district goals and map out when each objective will be addressed. This reflection falls under the second belief mentioned above: "We believe Aldine ISD can achieve higher levels of performance through clearly defined goals that set high expectations for student achievement" ("Aldine ISD Mission Statement"). The goals for the 2012-2013 school year are as follows:

1. Aldine ISD will improve and sustain growth in academic achievement.
2. Aldine ISD will provide a safe and secure learning environment for students and staff.
3. Aldine ISD will increase student, staff, parent, and community satisfaction in all campuses, facilities, and departments.
4. Aldine ISD will maintain fiscal solvency by applying sound financial principals and practices.
S. Aldine ISD will manage district operations and assets in an efficient manner.

(District Improvement Plan 2012-2013)
Each of these objectives also has a number of goals to be accomplished. For example, one goal under Objective 1 is to "improve, sustain, and support academic performance at or above grade level." Each goal also has a measure of success, targets to meet, and milestones. For each goal, there are sub-goals, which notate actions for the goal. It includes the target students (all students, at-risk students, etc.), the person or people responsible for making sure the goal is met, how the success will be measured, funding, and when the goal will be addressed during the school year. These reports are referred to as the District Improvement Plans and have been in place since the 2009-2010 school year (District Improvement Plan 2012-2013).

The District Improvement Plan indicates that Aldine ISD is highly reflective – they take their performance from years past and evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of what they are doing. Then, the district creates specific goals to meet within a certain amount of time. From a teaching standpoint, reflecting on what has gone well and what hasn’t is vital, because it gives teachers the opportunity to improve and tweak lessons and instruction styles to fit the needs of all learners. Taking the Aldine model of reflection and improvement will help hone teaching skills within the classroom, particularly the timeline aspect, because it will ensure that teachers and schools have a vision and understand how to achieve it.

**Parent and Community Involvement**

The third belief from Aldine’s list is that “we believe in the value of parents as the first and best teachers and that the community must actively participate in the development of all children” (“Aldine ISD Mission Statement”). In one of the student teaching seminars I attended, we discussed the community that is Aldine through the lens of diversity. Within any given school, there are multitudes of communities – the school community, the staff community, the grade level community, the classroom community, and the parent community are only to name a few. Each of these different communities ties to others, creating a web that is diverse, complex,
and interdependent. In the seminar, the presenters, Ms. Lupita Munoz and Ms. Margarita Guerra, talked about how there are different types of diversity – not just race, but also age, grade level, and gender (2013). The combination of the different types of diversity is what makes each community unique and helps foster learning opportunities to meet the needs of all learners, which helps the district succeed overall.

My own observations about community are mixed. There was ample opportunity for parents to participate in the classroom. We invited them to attend an open house; every fifth Tuesday, parents were asked to the school to eat lunch with their student(s); we had morning programs for parents to spend time with their student(s); when field trip day came, parents were asked to be chaperones. The involvement of parents in the instructional process was very advantageous for both students and teachers. Having parents invested in their child’s education created a much more open, welcoming environment and is something I plan to use to the fullest extent possible in my own classroom and I feel other teachers should as well.

**Staff Development**

The fourth core belief, “we believe in the value of each employee, in his/her personal and professional growth, and in empowering each one to be accountable to make decisions aligned with the vision of the school district” (“Aldine ISD Mission Statement”) is one that was addressed at that very first orientation seminar. The presenter, Dr. Selina Chapa, made a statement that was repeated many times throughout the semester – “We invest in our teachers, because without you, we wouldn’t be able to do what we do” (2013). Aldine makes a conscious effort to support its teachers and offers a variety of opportunities for staff development. “District staff development is offered four days per year. Ongoing staff development is offered after work and on Saturdays throughout the year. Summer staff development offers intensive one- to three-week courses during the summer months” (“Aldine ISD | Top 25 Reasons to Work in Aldine”). The district also offers a mentor program to help first year teachers succeed. The program pairs the first time teacher with a veteran teacher to provide support and advice. New teachers
are also given a copy of the book *Tools for Teaching* by Fred Jones, which provides classroom management techniques and strategies to improve instruction.

I had the opportunity to use the *Tools for Teaching* book during my student teaching experience in Aldine and observed many of the strategies in the schools. For example, the book describes a strategy called "Say, See, Do" (Jones). In essence, a teacher tells the students what they are doing, model how to do it, and then have students perform the task. I used this strategy many times throughout the semester and found it very effective. It helped prepare my students for the coming activity, demonstrated what they would be doing, and gave them instructions all at once. Having such a basic teaching strategy to use helps all teachers succeed, because it gives them the basic outline for instruction. From my own experiences, not using the "Say, See, Do" method sets a teacher up for more questions about instructions, and has students spending instructional time talking in circles rather than learning. Giving teachers these instructional strategies and tools indicates that Aldine goes the extra mile to help teachers succeed in the classroom, and they understand that when a teacher does well, the students flourish.

**Safety and Security**

The last core belief, that "...all environments should be supportive, safe, and secure" ("Aldine ISD Mission Statement") appears to be relatively straightforward. According to Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs, safety is second only to our physiological needs such as breathing, sleeping, and food ("Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs"). Within the schools, safety is taken very seriously. The high schools I entered all had metal detectors; all students in the district were required to have a mesh or clear backpack; visitors were required to be escorted and had to wear a name-tag from the office. In my school, the front doors were directly in front of the office, so the staff knew who was entering and leaving the building; there were cameras in the hallways monitoring the doors to the pods; pod doors and classroom doors were kept locked during school hours. These measures helped ensure the physical safety of both staff and students and seemed to give everyone peace of mind.

The classrooms themselves seemed to be designed to support student needs. There were books for students to access, computers to use, and many positive
reinforcement management strategies being used throughout the school. Students seemed very comfortable around their teachers and peers and were willing to come to a teacher with all types of issues. To me, this shows that the environment was open and did a good job of building relationships among teachers and students. It is absolutely something every teacher should accomplish in their own classroom, because it creates an atmosphere of warmth, cooperation, and love where students can thrive.

**Conclusion**

Aldine Independent School District is a thriving, successful urban district that breaks the typical correlation between socioeconomic status and success in school. Through their mission statement and core beliefs, they have been able to create learning environments that drive students to succeed. In my time there, I was able to observe and practice much of what is working well for them, from classroom management to relationships with peers. Everything I saw and experienced are things I am able to take away and apply to my own classroom, in the hopes that I will be able to replicate their successes. I only hope that other teachers and school districts use Aldine ISD as a role model of success and apply their techniques to help them as well.
Works Cited


