

ExceL Through Innovation Evaluation Report, 1998-99

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ExceL Through Innovation (ExceL) is a local funding initiative created to enhance elementary student achievement through innovative programs designed at the campus level for the specific students served. ExceL provides funding for implementation of instructional programs and program-related staff development at every elementary school in the Austin Independent School District (AISD). The primary goal of ExceL is to increase student achievement, with special emphases on closing gaps in achievement among student groups and increasing the knowledge and skills (i.e., building capacity) of campus staffs.

In 1996, campuses applied for ExceL grants after obtaining recommendations to do so from their Campus Advisory Committees. Then, campuses developed innovative instructional and staff development programs to address the needs of the student they served. Campuses set four-year, over-arching achievement goals and yearly achievement benchmarks for their programs. All 66 campuses received ExceL funding over all three years. Two additional elementary campuses opened in 1998 and received ExceL funds. Campuses were placed into one of three funding levels on the basis of the number of TAAS Reading and Mathematics tests failed in 1994-95 (or projections of number of TAAS failed, for the two new campuses). Then, campuses received instructional program funding allocations on the basis of their assigned funding levels and the

In Spring 1998, principals completed grant continuation surveys for 1998-99. Specifically, the continuation surveys included items regarding changes to programs, changes to program goals, and plans for staff development during 1998-99. In addition, in spring 1999, each principal completed a two-item evaluation survey for 1998-99. The survey included one item regarding attainment of the non-TAAS benchmarks campuses had set for themselves and one item regarding program changes that had taken place since spring 1998, when grant continuation surveys were completed. Finally, in January 1999, a sample of elementary principals completed the district's Coordinated Survey, which included eight questions about ExceL.

Findings

- ! As a result of the evaluation efforts, it was determined that 20% of campuses met all of their TAAS-related benchmarks for 1998-99; 38% met some of their benchmarks; 42% met none of their benchmarks. In addition, 38% of campuses met all of their non-TAAS-related benchmarks for 1998-99; 12% met some of their benchmarks; 24% met none of their benchmarks; 26% of campuses did not send adequate information to determine if they met their benchmarks.
- ! Campus instructional programs varied a great deal in type and in degree of innovation. This variation was due, at least partly, to the differences in funding amounts received. Overall, the five most common major foci for ExceL instructional programs were mathematics (94%), literacy (94%), writing (78%), parental involvement (44%), and science (28%).
- ! Due, in part, to workshops conducted by district staff to educate principals and other campus staff on the appropriate uses of ExceL funds, campuses have adapted, or are in the process of adapting, their programs to be aligned with the district curriculum.

- ! Campus staff development activities varied in cohesiveness and relatedness to instructional programs. For example, at some campuses, staff development funds were used for activities that were clearly focused on and directly related to instructional programs. At other campuses, however, staff development funds were used to supplement a wide variety of individual staff development needs, some of which were not directly related to instructional programs. Overall, the five most common staff development topics were literacy (71%), mathematics (49%), assessment (26%), technology (27%), and curriculum alignment/unit development (25%).
- ! The majority of ExceL principals reported that the ExceL program has positively impacted student achievement and should be continued during the 1999-00 school year. In addition, a majority of principals reported that ExceL instructional and staff development budgets were adequate to meet their ExceL program needs. However, moderate percentages of principals reported that their ExceL instructional and staff development budgets were inadequate (39% and 29% percent, respectively). The majority of principals reported that they understood district policy concerning usage of ExceL funds and that the curriculum resources they chose were aligned with the district curriculum. Finally, most principals reported feeling free to use innovative resources and methods in their programs.

Recommendations

After examining the evaluation results, it is recommended that ExceL program funding should be allocated competitively. In order to receive funding, campuses should agree to take responsibility for the following: spending all of their funds, utilizing curriculum resources and instructional methods that are aligned with the district curriculum, fully evaluating their programs, and striving to achieve the yearly benchmarks they set for themselves.