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Meeting New Challenges at the Aldine Independent School District (B)

After 41 years in education, all spent in Aldine, Texas, Superintendent Nadine Kujawa retired in May 2007. The school board chose Wanda Bamberg, the assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction, to succeed Kujawa.¹ Bamberg had begun her career in Aldine in 1982 as a middle school teacher and first moved to the district office in 1987 as the director of middle school language arts.² When appointed to the position of superintendent, Bamberg had been actively involved in Aldine's curriculum restructuring for a decade and looked forward to continuing that work in her new role.³

As Bamberg took the reins, Aldine was drafting enthusiastic plans for the future. In May 2007, voters approved a \$365 million bond package, allowing the district to proceed with plans to build 12 new schools over the next 10 years.⁴ By October of that year, the board was confident enough in the district's plans to unanimously vote to lower the tax rate for the 2007–2008 school year.⁵ The national economic collapse, which began in October 2008, did not spare Aldine. Texas received over \$3 billion in federal stimulus money in 2009, which the governor and legislature used to replace rather than supplement state funding for education. By October 2010, a proposal to raise tax revenue for the district was defeated at the polls, Bamberg and the board had been forced to cut \$40 million from the district budget, and the district was using its reserve funds to pay operating expenses.⁶ As the 2011 school year drew to a close, Texas was still facing a \$27 billion budget shortfall, and it was clear that statewide education funding would not be spared cuts, as legislators worked to address the gap.⁷

While Bamberg was forced to increase class sizes and implement a hiring freeze to balance the budgets for school years 2010 and 2011, she worked to retain the core elements of the Aldine strategy. Aldine's vision remained "Produce the Nation's Best," and the first district objective was still to "Demonstrate sustained growth in student achievement."⁸ The remaining objectives reflected the new context of constrained resources and Bamberg's focus on improving school environment:⁹

- Implement effective student management strategies to improve student behavior.
- Improve parent-community relations by creating a welcoming environment in all campuses, facilities, and departments.
- Maintain fiscal solvency by applying sound financial principles and practices.
- Manage district operations and assets in an efficient manner.

Research Associates Elisha Brookover and Geoff Marietta prepared this case under the supervision of Professors Allen S. Grossman and Monica Higgins. This case was developed from published sources. PELP cases are developed solely as the basis for class discussion. Cases are not intended to serve as endorsements, sources of primary data, or illustrations of effective or ineffective management.

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As before under Kujawa, every central office department, vertical area, school, and school department was expected to develop and implement action plans and scorecards aligned with the district's five objectives. In terms of curriculum and instruction, Aldine still relied on a "managed instruction" approach.¹⁰ Schools followed a prescriptive curriculum with detailed six-week scope and sequence guides aligned with the Texas state standards. These were supported by three- and six-week district benchmarking assessments.

The district remained organized into five vertical feeder systems, spanning early childhood through high school, and was overseen by area superintendents.¹¹ Though there was some turnover in the area superintendent position after Kujawa's retirement—only two had more than four years of experience in the role—all five had more than 18 years experience and been principals in Aldine.¹² Area superintendents and central office curriculum program directors continued to meet regularly in horizontal team meetings. The district's leadership pathway had also changed little, though Bamberg had worked to formalize the identification process. Aldine principals nearly always started as teachers in the district and progressed through a series of leadership positions that included assistant principal, elementary school principal, intermediate or middle school principal, and eventually high school principal. Principal turnover in Aldine continued to be very low, with only a handful of principals being dismissed or demoted in the past several years.

Despite the challenges of a shrinking budget, Aldine students sustained their high performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). The district was a state leader in reading and math proficiency (see **Exhibit 1** for a breakdown of students' scores). In addition, after being named a finalist three times, the district received the prestigious Broad Prize for Urban Education in 2009, which annually honors the best urban school system in the nation. Contest officials applauded Aldine's rigorous expectations for staff as well as students' exceptional levels of success, across socioeconomic and ethnic groups, on statewide exams.¹³

Even as Aldine celebrated these successes, new challenges emerged in the form of a more rigorous state test, the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), and flatlining college readiness scores. The STAAR, set to replace the TAKS in the 2012 school year, was designed to assess standards that addressed broad, deep ideas and required in-depth instruction to reach mastery. Advance descriptions of the STAAR noted that it would include more open-ended questions and critical analysis, and would include more cognitively complex questions.¹⁴ Furthermore, while Aldine students showed success on the TAKS, they had yet to demonstrate improvement on college-entrance exams (see **Exhibit 2** for SAT and ACT scores).

The implementation of STAAR and an ongoing budget crisis presented a difficult challenge for Bamberg. Aldine would be expected to show improvement on the STAAR much as it had with the TAKS and TAAS. However, this time, the district had to accomplish the task with fewer resources. Compounding the challenge was a trend toward serving higher percentages of low-income, special education, and English language learner students (see **Exhibit 3** for Aldine demographics). There was also the question of whether Aldine's strategy could meet the increased rigor of the STAAR. Ultimately, it was Bamberg who had to decide how Aldine would address these and future challenges. She could keep the district doing what had worked so well in the past or strike out in an entirely new direction.

Exhibit 1 Percent of Aldine Independent School District (AISD) Students Scoring Proficient or Higher on the TAKS (2006–2010)

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
Elementary Schools (4th grade)					
<i>Reading (4th grade total)</i>	84%	86%	84%	84%	85%
White	86%	93%	91%	88%	89%
African American	80%	80%	77%	77%	79%
Hispanic	86%	89%	87%	87%	87%
Free/Reduced Meal	83%	85%	84%	83%	85%
English Language Learners	72%	84%	84%	86%	85%
<i>Math (4th grade total)</i>	89%	90%	91%	89%	91%
White	91%	92%	93%	87%	92%
African American	83%	83%	84%	82%	86%
Hispanic	92%	93%	94%	92%	93%
Free/Reduced Meal	89%	90%	91%	88%	91%
English Language Learners	91%	91%	94%	90%	93%
Middle Schools (8th grade)					
<i>Reading (8th grade total)</i>	82%	90%	94%	94%	93%
White	87%	92%	99%	96%	94%
African American	81%	90%	94%	95%	94%
Hispanic	82%	90%	95%	93%	93%
Free/Reduced Meal	81%	90%	94%	94%	93%
English Language Learners	42%	55%	72%	68%	71%
<i>Math (8th grade total)</i>	68%	79%	83%	85%	88%
White	80%	83%	86%	91%	90%
African American	60%	73%	79%	81%	84%
Hispanic	71%	82%	85%	87%	89%
Free/Reduced Meal	67%	78%	82%	86%	88%
English Language Learners	41%	56%	62%	64%	72%
High Schools (10th grade)					
<i>English Language Arts (10th grade total)</i>	86%	85%	87%	87%	89%
White	92%	88%	90%	89%	94%
African American	85%	85%	89%	87%	89%
Hispanic	86%	85%	87%	87%	88%
Free/Reduced Meal	85%	84%	87%	86%	88%
English Language Learners	41%	44%	50%	49%	46%
<i>Math (10th grade total)</i>	62%	56%	57%	66%	77%
White	79%	74%	74%	73%	85%
African American	54%	46%	52%	69%	71%
Hispanic	64%	60%	57%	69%	79%
Free/Reduced Meal	61%	55%	56%	66%	77%
English Language Learners	34%	30%	30%	42%	52%

Source: Casewriter, based on data from the Aldine Independent School District website http://www.aldine.k12.tx.us/sections/about/accountability/accountability_info.cfm, accessed June 2, 2011.

Exhibit 2 AISD SAT and ACT Mean Scores and Participation Rates

	2006	2007	2008	2009
SAT				
All	1329	1321	1290	1289
African American	1274	1253	1225	1217
Asian	1462	1416	1371	1445
Hispanic	1345	1350	1322	1318
White	1432	1461	1465	1523
SAT Participation				
All	33	37	41	39
African American	37	41	49	45
Asian	*	*	*	*
Hispanic	23	29	33	34
White	38	40	*	*
ACT				
All	17.3	16.9	17.6	17.2
African American	16.2	15.6	17.0	16.2
Asian	19.7	*	*	*
Hispanic	17.9	17.9	17.8	17.5
White	20.6	*	23.2	*
ACT Participation				
All	17	14	13	15
African American	22	18	18	21
Asian	*	*	*	*
Hispanic	11	9	8	10
White	10	8	*	*

*Test scores were suppressed if fewer than 15 students took the test. Participation rates were suppressed due to unreliability or if the subgroup represented less than 5% of district enrollment in the relevant grades.

Source: SAT and ACT data compiled by the Broad Prize from the Common Core of Data, ACT, and the College Board, <http://www.broadprize.org/resources/reports2010.html>, accessed May 2011.

Exhibit 3 AISD Demographics in 2005 and 2011

	2005	2011
Student Demographics		
Number of students (preK-12)	56,127	62,055
Hispanic	58.0%	67.1%
African American	33.1%	28.1%
White	6.4%	3.1%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.4%	1.1%
Native American	0.1%	0.1%
Economically disadvantaged	76.6%	85.2%
Limited English proficiency	24.9%	32.0%
Special education students	9.8%	7.0%

Source: 2005 Data: *Texas Education Agency Academic Excellence Indicator System 2003–04 District Performance Report*, TEA website, <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/cgi/sas/broker>, accessed March 9, 2005; *Aldine at a Glance, Information and Facts about the AISD in Houston, Texas*. 2011 Data: Aldine Independent School District, “Fast Facts,” Aldine Independent School District website, http://www.aldine.k12.tx.us/sections/about/fast_facts.cfm, accessed June 2011; Texas Education Agency, “District Snapshot 2010,” Texas Education Agency website, <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/cgi/sas/broker>, accessed June 2011.

Endnotes

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¹² Aldine Independent School District, "Area Superintendents."

¹³ Ericka Mellon, "Educational Breakthrough a Big Prize for Aldine," *Houston Chronicle*, September 17, 2009, via Factiva, accessed May 2011.

¹⁴ Texas Education Agency, "State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Resources," Texas Education Agency website, <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/staar/>, accessed May 2011.