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

Aldine Independent School District (AISD) Superintendent Nadine Kujawa reviewed the district's 2005 Texas assessment results with mixed emotions. On one hand, AISD students had performed roughly at the same level as their counterparts statewide – a notable accomplishment for the largely minority and low-income school system. Seventy-one percent of AISD students met standards in mathematics as compared to 70% of students statewide, while 81% of pupils were reading on grade level in AISD, just slightly below the 83% state average. On the other hand, three of the district's 62 schools were rated *academically unacceptable* by the state for the first time since 1995.[1]

Kujawa had weathered difficult times before during her 41-year career in AISD. As the former deputy superintendent for curriculum and instruction, Kujawa was the chief architect of reforms that had moved AISD from the third lowest among Harris County's 54 school systems in 1994 to the state's largest consecutively *recognized* school system in 2001, with approximately 90% of students passing state assessments. When Kujawa assumed the helm at AISD in the fall of 2001, she found herself driving a redoubling of efforts in anticipation of a considerably more challenging state assessment, which launched in 2003. Under the new test, student achievement dropped sharply, a sizeable achievement gap reemerged, and AISD lost its *recognized* status.

To date, Kujawa had followed closely in the footsteps of her revered predecessor, "Sonny" M.B. Donaldson (1986-2001), by keeping a laser-like focus on student achievement and refining the organizational and instructional changes introduced during his administration. Kujawa wondered what it would take to regain high levels of academic achievement in AISD—continuing to improve the longstanding practices that had brought the district success in the past or rethinking the district's managerial approach altogether?

[1] Under the Texas accountability system, districts and schools were rated *exemplary, recognized, academically acceptable, or academically unacceptable* based on student performance on state tests and other achievement indicators.

Research Associate Caroline King prepared this case under the supervision of Professors Stacey Childress and Allen S. Grossman. 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.

Overview of Assessment and Accountability in Texas

Texas operated under an extensive standards-based accountability system, the result of a 25-year reform effort (see **Exhibit 1** for a timeline of key events). In 1990, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) introduced the state's first criterion-referenced test, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS).[2] TAAS measured students' mastery of the state's reading, mathematics, and writing standards in grades 3–10; however, TAAS was largely perceived as a test of basic skills. In 1997, the state implemented more challenging content standards, known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), and began work on a new assessment aligned with the TEKS. Six years later, in 2003, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) replaced the TAAS. The TAKS tested students' mastery of the TEKS, and was widely considered a more rigorous assessment of students' conceptual and analytical skills.

Although students took the TAKS for the first time in 2003, districts and schools retained their TAAS-based 2002 accountability ratings that transition year. 2004 marked the first year that TAKS results were used to determine the rankings. High school students failing the TAKS exit exams were denied diplomas. Promotion requirements were adopted incrementally to follow a cohort of students. Starting in 2003, 3rd graders had to meet TAKS reading standards to enter the 4th grade. Beginning in 2005, 5th graders were required to meet TAKS reading and mathematics standards for promotion, and 8th grade would be added in 2008.

AISD Background

Serving a working-class community of Houston, Texas, Aldine Independent School District (AISD) was the 76th-largest school system in the U.S. and the eleventh largest in Texas. From 1990-2005, demographic shifts altered the district's student body from relatively middle class and ethnically balanced to increasingly low-income and minority. During this same period, student enrollment grew steadily by approximately 2.5% per year. In SY05,[3] AISD enrolled 56,127 students in 62 schools and had a $429 million annual budget (see **Exhibit 2** for district facts and figures). Hispanics comprised 58% of AISD students, African-Americans 33%, whites 6%, and Asians 2%. Slightly over three-quarters of students qualified for free or reduced-price meals and 25% were learning English for the first time. Schools belonged to one of five "verticals" and were organized as early childhood/pre-kindergarten centers, elementary schools (grades K–4), intermediate schools (grades 5–6), middle schools (grades 7–8), 9th grade centers, and senior high schools (grades 10–12).

A seven member Board of Education (the "Board") served as the policymaking body in AISD. Trustees were elected at large to three-year terms, and the Board enjoyed relatively stable membership as four trustees had each served over 12 years in SY05. On the night before their regularly scheduled monthly meeting, the Board held a public study session to preview the agenda. If the Board could not reach consensus on an issue during the study session, it tabled the item until the following month in order to avoid acrimonious public debates. As Board seats became vacant, current members encouraged people with strong ties to the district who shared the AISD student achievement agenda to run for office.

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[2] Criterion-referenced assessments compare an individual's performance to a specific performance standard and not to the performance of other students. In contrast, norm-referenced assessments rank a student's performance in relation to the performance of a larger "norm group." See http://www.cresst.org/resources/glossary_set.htm.

[3] SY is a PELP convention that denotes "school year." For example, SY05 refers to the 2004–05 school year.

As Texas was a "right to work" state, AISD teachers had the choice whether or not to join and/or financially support the three local teachers' associations operating in the district. The associations offered members professional advice, development, and networking opportunities. In SY05, the three groups collectively counted about 1,000 of Aldine's 3,616 teachers as members.

Superintendent Nadine Kujawa and the AISD Journey

Kujawa's Background

Kujawa had attended district schools and graduated from Aldine Senior High School. Upon receiving her bachelor's degree in elementary education from Sam Houston State University, Kujawa returned to AISD as a second grade teacher. After five years in the classroom and earning a master's degree in education from the University of Houston, Kujawa served as principal in three elementary schools, the district's personnel director, assistant superintendent of human resources, and deputy superintendent of curriculum and instruction.

A Shock to the System

1994 marked a turning point for AISD and Kujawa's career. That year, the district received its first public accountability rating from the state. Kujawa recalled Aldine's "lackluster" SY94 *academically acceptable* rating as "the shock our system needed to wake up." Fifty percent of students failed the TAAS tests (see **Exhibit 3**). The results also revealed a substantial achievement gap between white and minority students. Whereas 85% of whites passed the TAAS reading exam, only 65% of African-American and 71% of Hispanics passed. On TAAS math, 72% of whites passed compared to 42% and 55% of their African-American and Hispanic counterparts, respectively.

In 1995, then Superintendent Donaldson promised the Board that AISD would achieve *recognized* status by 1996. Donaldson then offered Kujawa her "dream job"—deputy superintendent of curriculum and instruction—a position that had been vacant for three years. From SY96–SY01, while Donaldson focused on reorienting the district's operations to support principals, Kujawa revamped curriculum and instruction. AISD earned its first *recognized* label in SY97, a status it upheld for six years (see **Exhibit 4**).

Following Donaldson's retirement in 2001, the Board voted unanimously to appoint Kujawa as AISD's first female superintendent. In SY02, the final year that the state administered the TAAS and Kujawa's first year as superintendent, approximately 90% of AISD students, including African-American, Hispanic, and low-income pupils, passed the state assessments (see **Exhibit 3**).

Kujawa Tackles TAKS (2003-2005)

Despite the district's apparent success under TAAS, Kujawa was not satisfied. She remembered:

> I knew that TAAS was a basic skills test and that we were entering a whole new world with TAKS. Even though we had attained high TAAS scores, the district's SAT and Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) scores had remained flat and well behind national and state averages (see **Exhibit 5**). I knew the district had to do more to prepare students for success in college or the workforce. At the same time, I felt that AISD had the right foundation in place to confront the TAKS challenge head on. Our key to continuous improvement has been to keep singing the song that everybody already knows while adding new verses.

The district's SY03 TAKS scores delivered a second "shock to the system." Only 49% of students met standards in science, 70% in mathematics, 78% in reading, 85% in writing, 86% in social studies. While Kujawa and her cabinet had expected AISD's results to decline under TAKS, they were surprised by the precipitous drop. They were also frustrated to see that an achievement gap, something they had worked so hard to eliminate over the past decade, had reemerged (see **Exhibit 6**).

While AISD students achieved incremental gains on the SY04 and SY05 TAKS, Kujawa's sights were set much higher. She expected AISD to educate all students to meet state standards, and she continued to drive the district towards achieving this goal. As she puzzled over her next steps, Kujawa reflected on the district's decade-long transformation in hopes of identifying key success factors as well as potential shortcomings.

Setting Objectives and Measuring Progress

Upon assuming the helm at AISD in SY02, Kujawa set out to clarify the district's mission and work. "We had taken a big step forward under TAAS in that we finally defined our 'business' as improving student achievement, but I was not yet convinced that everyone in the district—all 7,500 employees—understood their contribution," Kujawa recalled. After adopting the Baldrige Education Criteria for Performance Excellence (Baldrige), Kujawa led a strategic planning process involving principals and teachers from every school, senior and mid-level managers, clerical and operations staff, and external stakeholders.[4] The district articulated a new mission statement, "Produce the Nation's Best," and four objectives:

1. AISD will demonstrate sustained growth in student achievement;
2. AISD will recruit, employ, and retain a quality teaching, administrative, and support staff to attain excellence in student performance;
3. AISD will allocate resources to maximize excellence; and
4. AISD will increase and improve stakeholder partnerships and satisfaction.

A member of Kujawa's cabinet held ownership for each objective. Each "owner" developed an action plan, managed implementation, and monitored and reported on district progress towards meeting the objective each quarter using a "scorecard" (see **Exhibit 7a** for an excerpt from the district action plan). The scorecard outlined all of the district activities that were underway to accomplish the specific objective. Quarterly performance data for each was measured against the district's one-, three-, and five-year targets; prior quarters from the same school year; and the previous school year's average. Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Wanda Bamberg, who was responsible for objective #1, described an example of how the cabinet used the scorecards. "One quarter, the scorecard showed that student attendance had dropped significantly. We brainstormed why it fell, discussed what were we going to do to increase it, and how we were going to evaluate the effectiveness of our actions next quarter. Before the scorecards, we would have been lucky to discover we had a problem before the end of the year."

Every central office department, vertical area, and school developed action plans and companion scorecards aligned with the district's four objectives (see **Exhibits 7b** and **7c** for examples). In schools, every department, such as language arts and mathematics, also had action plans. Following

[4] Baldrige is a performance management tool utilized in Brazosport and at some other school systems nationwide.

the lead of some innovative principals, Kujawa intended to extend the action plans and scorecards to individual teachers, students, and parents in the near future (see **Exhibit 7d**).

Organizing the Aldine Way

PK-12 Vertical Areas

AISD Schools belonged to one of five "verticals." Each vertical was named after its senior high school and included the K-9 feeder schools. Four verticals (Aldine, Eisenhower, MacArthur, and Nimitz) comprised neighborhood schools, while the fifth vertical, Carver, encompassed all magnet schools. Economically disadvantaged students represented between 73% and 83% of each vertical; other demographic indicators varied as a reflection of the communities served (see **Exhibit 8**).

An area superintendent (AS) managed each vertical. Prior to 1995, an assistant superintendent for elementary schools had managed over 30 K–8 buildings while a counterpart supported a dozen secondary schools. Donaldson introduced the vertical structure in 1995 to increase PK–12 alignment and reduce the number of principals reporting to any one central office supervisor. AS's convened vertical meetings with their principals every other week, often meeting in a different school. Area superintendents monitored principals' school action plans, conducted school "walkthroughs," and evaluated principals. The five AS's reported directly to Kujawa, with whom they met weekly to discuss trends and challenges across the district.

The area superintendents in place in SY05 had a long history together spanning various district roles. All five had spent the majority of their careers in AISD; each started out in the district as a classroom teacher, and four of the five had served as an assistant principal and principal. The five area superintendents scheduled meetings together as a group on an as-needed basis, and frequently shared information informally. Nimitz Area Superintendent Doris Delaney explained, "Since we have all worked together for quite a while in different capacities, it is very easy for us to have one-on-one conversations when we need advice or support. We also do our best to meet as a group as our schedules permit. But, if there is a crisis, we make sure that we all pull together." Another AS, Gloria Cavazos, reflected on her role in the district:

> My two most important jobs are hiring exceptional principals and playing a brokering role to help my principals find the resources and supports they need. They control their own funds, but they look to me for advice, for example, when they wanted to adopt a new program for English language learners vertical-wide. We want the Aldine vertical to be the best in the district, not only because we have a healthy sense of competition, but because we don't want to be the vertical to hold the district back.

Horizontal Resources

Horizontal meetings School leadership teams from across all five verticals and central office administrators participated in biweekly "horizontal" meetings. In 1995, district leadership changed the content of the horizontal meetings from administrative to instructional, with a focus on providing professional development for principals. Throughout the years, horizontal meetings emphasized three topics: analyzing achievement data, unveiling instructional strategies that would be rolled out to teachers, and celebrating results. School leadership teams and central office curriculum managers also spent part of the meetings in grade-level breakout groups. Discussions focused on diagnosing common challenges, sharing organizational and instructional practices, and grade-level initiatives.

Program directors A team of over 35 program directors (PD) shepherded curriculum design and content area professional development in AISD. Each content area (e.g., mathematics) had at least two PDs, one for elementary grades and one for secondary grades. Program directors resided at the central office and reported to Bamberg, with whom they met weekly. Program directors attended vertical meetings if requested by an area superintendent, and all horizontal meetings. A principal could invite a PD to work on their school at any time; however, PDs worked most closely with the lowest performing schools in their content area and grade level.

School Management and Support

Leadership teams Each school was managed by the principal and a leadership team, typically comprised of the vice principals, department and grade-level chairs, and teacher coaches known as "skills specialists." Leadership teams developed school action plans and budgets, made curricular and managerial decisions, designed professional development, and planned parent engagement activities. Principals held ultimate decision-making authority and were held accountable for student achievement results and fiscal responsibility by area superintendents. Reflecting on this relationship, MacArthur Area Superintendent Margarita Byrum said, "It is my job to know when a principal needs a pat or a push to get to the next level in optimizing educational services for the children."

School budgets Using staffing ratios based on student enrollment, the central office determined the minimum number of administrative and instructional positions required at each school. *Average* salary costs were used to enable principals to hire individuals without regard for their *actual* salary.[5] These personnel costs consumed approximately 80% of the school's budget. The remaining 20% included special revenues (e.g. state and federal compensatory funds or other grants) and the "principal's budget," which covered supplies and other operational expenses. Some schools raised additional money and in-kind contributions through fundraisers. Principals exercised complete control over their special revenue funds, principal's budget, and fundraising proceeds. If the principal purchased additional staff, such as a teacher, the principal had to pay the individual's *actual* salary cost. The only criteria that the finance office used to evaluate school budgets were that the proposed activities served an instructional purpose and supported improved student achievement. Assistant Superintendent for Finance Keith Clark explained: Our philosophy is that the principal has the best understanding of what the teachers and students at his/her school need to accelerate academic achievement, and therefore, we should not tie the principal's hands behind their back. And if the principal believes something will raise academic achievement, then he or she will pay for it. But we make the principals stand by their decisions by holding them accountable for results.

Skills specialists Skills specialists (SS) were school-based veteran teachers that offered support in a core content area, such as English/language arts, mathematics, or science. Skill specialists analyzed student assessment data with teachers, modeled strategies to differentiate instruction, and worked with struggling students. Every elementary, middle, and intermediate school had at least one full-time SS; high schools had at least two. Many principals hired additional SS with their discretionary funds.

[5] For example, teachers earned between $38,000–$57,928 annually based on years of experience and education credentials.

Curriculum and Instruction Reforms

During the mid- to late- 1990s, Kujawa established a new districtwide standards-based curriculum, known as the "benchmark targets," and revamped professional development in the district. "Under TAAS, we learned we could only make progress as a system if all of our teachers understood the concepts embedded in the state standards and how to teach them. Once kids mastered the standards, I knew the TAAS scores would take care of themselves, and they did," Kujawa recalled.

AISD Curriculum: The Benchmark Targets

In 1996, Kujawa spearheaded the creation of districtwide curriculum frameworks, which later became known as the "benchmark targets." The benchmark targets outlined the skills every student was expected to master in a given subject at each grade level, and were divided into six- or nine-week sequences (see **Exhibit 9** for a sample). Each skill referenced a specific state standard and specified the cognitive level of instruction and student mastery expected for each skill based on Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives.[6] The cognitive levels moved from basic actions, such as summarizing facts, to more advanced competencies, such as applying or creating concepts. Kujawa reflected on how the benchmark targets impacted the district: "We invested heavily in professional development for teachers and we started holding principals accountable for improving performance on state assessments. 'The Aldine way' is simply letting people know what you expect of them and then giving them the resources, support, and flexibility to achieve results."

While the district required every school to follow the benchmark targets, principals retained autonomy in choosing how to design and deliver the curriculum in their school. Working with the school leadership team, principals made choices about their school's educational program based on district and school action plans, student needs, previous assessment results, teacher capacity and input, and available resources. For example, elementary schools implemented a variety of reading programs, including direct instruction, balanced literacy, and guided reading.

Every school administered mandatory "benchmark assessments" in December and May to evaluate students' mastery of the benchmark targets. Benchmark assessments existed for every grade level and content area, and were revised each summer. Principals, area superintendents, and Kujawa used the benchmark test results to assess the effectiveness of instruction, teacher training, and resource allocation in schools.

Professional Development

Kujawa had also led the charge to revamp AISD's 10 professional development days. From SY96–SY00, Kujawa and her team designated 3 ½ days for districtwide training, allowing schools to design their own staff development for the remaining 6 ½ days. In 2000, when over 85% of students passed the TAAS reading and mathematics tests at every AISD school, the district handed control over all 10 staff development days to principals. With the advent of the TAKS, however, in SY03, Kujawa reclaimed the district's 3 ½ days. Bamberg explained, "TAKS was a new reality for us, but we had already learned under TAAS how important it was to set the same standards and expectations for everyone from the beginning." Kujawa had planned to relinquish the district's control over professional development again in SY06, but the SY05 TAKS results made her wonder if schools

[6] In 1956, educational psychologist Benjamin Bloom developed a taxonomy of instructional objectives based on the six major types of cognitive learning: knowledge, comprehension, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation.

needed more time to increase their capacity to effectively structure professional development on their own.

Some verticals also developed verticalwide professional development approaches. For example, between 1995 and 2005, all 10 MacArthur schools had pooled a portion of their school-based financial resources each year in order to work collectively with two external professional development providers. "One of my objectives is to create alignment from PK through 12th grade," explained MacArthur Area Superintendent Margarita Byrum. "As a result of the vertical professional development, the MacArthur area schools share a common language and set of expectations around curriculum and instruction and a belief system that every child can achieve."

Attracting Talent, Growing Leaders

In 2005, Kujawa explained AISD's approach to staffing: "Everyone you see in a leadership position has a long history in the district and has moved as the district has moved. We start by bringing in the very best teachers we can find, and then tap those who are doing outstanding jobs for instructional leadership roles in schools."

Teachers

Deputy Superintendent Archie Blanson described how the district's approach to recruiting teachers had evolved over time. "While we had always worked hard to recruit the best and brightest teachers, we stopped defining our competition as merely other school districts in the late 1990s," said Blanson. "Our competition is the job market, period. It's the top chemistry graduate who would rather work at Exxon than teach in AISD."

In SY05, district representatives attended over 200 job fairs around the world, cultivated numerous university partnerships, and promoted alternative certification programs to attract non-traditional candidates. At the Board's behest, AISD teacher salaries ranked within the top five among surrounding school districts. While AISD hired between 400-600 new teachers per year, nearly seven qualified applicants existed for every open position. While the district's annual teacher turnover rate was 12.4%, the experience of the AISD teaching corps had remained relatively consistent from 1994–2004 (see **Exhibit 10**).

Principals

People throughout the district reflected on how the state accountability environment had impacted the principalship in AISD. Blanson commented: "Prior to TAAS, most of our principals were ex-football coaches, especially in the high schools. They had always seemed like fine principals, but the moment you started talking about curriculum, subgroups' performance on the TAAS, and providing differentiated instruction to every child, it was difficult for some of them to make the transition." A senior high school principal in SY05 who had served as a principal in both the Aldine and Carver verticals since SY94 recalled, "No one wanted to be at the bottom of the barrel. Everyone wanted to be a *recognized* school and so, we did whatever it took to get our kids to pass the TAAS and get there. We're doing the same with TAKS."

In SY05, all 62 AISD principals had come up through the district's teacher-assistant principal ranks, and had an average of six years of experience in the principalship. First-year principals were usually placed in elementary schools. As vacancies arose at the middle and secondary levels, area superintendents often hired successful elementary principals from within the vertical. Area

superintendents interviewed candidates for principal vacancies within their verticals and made hiring recommendations to Kujawa. Many area superintendents included all of their principals in the interview and selection process.

A second-year MacArthur area elementary school principal compared his relationships with vertical versus horizontal colleagues: "Each vertical is like a clique with its own culture, as many of us have worked together as teachers and administrators for a long time. Within the vertical, we treat each other like family and share everything—what's working, what's not, and where we are stumped."

Evaluation and Performance Incentives

The district capped contracts with principals and teachers at two-years with renewal subject to evaluation. Area superintendents evaluated principals based on objectives outlined on their school action plans related to student achievement, AYP status, student attendance, promotion and/or graduation rates, staff attendance and retention rates, and efficient use of resources. Principals evaluated teachers on their own attendance, student attendance, and student achievement. Principals had the ability to place struggling teachers on "growth plans" and dismiss teachers after two years.

Schools earning an *exemplary* or *recognized* rating received financial awards. AISD allocated the award to a school as a lump sum, and a school committee comprised of teachers and staff elected by their peers then decided how to disburse the funds. For example, one exemplary elementary school received a $50,000 incentive award in SY05. The committee debated whether to divide the money equally between all of the K–4 teachers, or to award a higher amount to the third and fourth grade teachers since only third and fourth graders took the TAKS tests. The school eventually decided to split the money evenly, with each K–4 teacher receiving approximately $1200.

When schools were not achieving results, the district intervened by placing principals on growth plans comprised of staff development and monitoring. Principals who failed to improve within three years could be released, although to date, senior leaders commented that no AISD principal had ever been dismissed based on performance. Kujawa explained her approach: "I give principals three years to demonstrate that they can produce results, but that doesn't mean I stand around the first two years. If achievement languishes, we may get increasingly more prescriptive if we need to, but never authoritative. We've never found success that way in AISD."

Kujawa Assesses AISD

As Kujawa studied the SY05 TAKS results, she found the fifth grade reading scores particularly troubling. For the third year in a row, the percentage of AISD fifth readers meeting reading standards lagged about 10 points below the statewide average. In keeping with "the Aldine way," Kujawa had tasked elementary principals in SY03, SY04, and SY05 with diagnosing the root causes of the fifth graders' low test scores and implementing interventions to improve performance in their respective schools. In addition, Kujawa charged Bamberg's curriculum and instruction team with supporting principals' efforts and the five area superintendents with monitoring results.

The stagnant SY05 fifth grade reading scores convinced Kujawa that she needed to radically change her approach. "When you hit crisis mode, it's the superintendent's job to take over the helm of the ship, point the direction, and steer the course," she explained. Furthermore, the unresolved issue illuminated three of Kujawa's broader concerns: strengthening instruction, managing the verticals, and balancing autonomy and organizational learning. Kujawa believed that making

progress in these three areas would be critical if the district was going to accelerate student performance at all grade levels in SY06.

Managing Instruction

Acknowledging the pressures caused by the high-stakes accountability environment, there was some debate over the extent to which AISD teachers were imparting test-taking strategies versus developing their students' cognitive and critical thinking skills. The principal of an elementary magnet school offered a concrete example of the tension experienced by teachers: "The reality is, if your third graders do not pass TAKS, they will not be promoted to the fourth grade, and that will be public knowledge. That puts a lot of pressure on teachers to emphasize test-taking skills, particularly for struggling students."

Sara Ptomey, the program director for secondary mathematics, also suggested that the district's instructional reforms had not deeply penetrated high school classrooms. "Since the 10th grade TAAS exit exam only tested seventh or eighth grade level competencies, many high school teachers could get away with peppering their class with some test-taking skills," Ptomey remarked. Bamberg also suggested that the benchmark targets needed major revision, not just another "summer rewrite." "I think we may have written our benchmark targets so discretely that many teachers are unable to see or help their students understand the bigger conceptual links that are tested on TAKS," Bamberg explained. "We are also finding that teachers may have taught the appropriate skill of a benchmark target, but not at the right level," she added.

Managing the Verticals

Uneven performance by vertical represented another major area of concern. Indeed, the student achievement data indicated that the MacArthur schools had consistently outperformed the other four verticals since SY97, and had weathered the TAKS transition with the least impact on student performance (see **Exhibit 4**). Further, the MacArthur vertical had achieved these results while serving the highest percentage of socio-economically disadvantaged students (83%) and second highest percentage of English language learners (34%) as compared to the other four verticals. The vertical performance gaps were further illuminated by the 2005 accountability ratings and the reemergence of *academically unacceptable* schools in the district (see **Exhibit 4**).

As Kujawa hypothesized about the potential causes of the performance gaps that existed across the verticals, she also focused on the area superintendents' leadership. On one hand, she accepted the unique managerial styles and approaches of her five area superintendents. "I expect the area superintendents to deliver a consistent message about our performance expectations and then work with their principals to ensure that those results are achieved. However, I expect *how* the area superintendents do that to vary based on their individual strengths and weaknesses," Kujawa said.

On the other hand, she had observed some distinguishing characteristics among the verticals which appeared directly related to both the area superintendent's managerial style and student achievement. Kujawa identified three key practices:

1. The instructional and leadership capacity of the principals hired in the vertical;

2. An area superintendent's level of engagement with principals in developing and monitoring school action plans, problem solving, and brokering support versus spending time on administrative or operational issues; and

3. The degree to which an area superintendent fostered collaboration, trust, and shared expectations among their principals.

At the same time, Kujawa grappled with how to productively manage the spirit of competition that flourished across the verticals: "Our area superintendents are all "top-flyers," and naturally, they are quite competitive and take pride in sharing their schools' successes. If we're not careful, though, each vertical can become like a kingdom of its own. I have to work extremely hard to ensure that each vertical sees itself as part of a larger whole."

Balancing Autonomy and Organizational Learning

While area superintendents often observed innovations in their schools, the district was hesitant in taking the lead to translate individual school practices into districtwide mandates, including those that appeared to produce above average gains in student achievement. Kujawa explained: "Our senior high schools alone demonstrate that schools can develop multiple pathways to success." Indeed, all five of the district's senior high schools earned exemplary or *recognized* ratings during the final year of TAAS while employing very different approaches. For example, Aldine Senior followed a four-period 90 minute block schedule, implemented a computer-based skills program for students failing state assessments, and piloted small learning communities. Alternatively, MacArthur Senior High School had hired former elementary teachers as skills specialists and remediation teachers, invested heavily in professional development, and followed a seven period, 45-minute class schedule.

However, Kujawa recognized that the five senior high schools had responded quite differently to the arrival of TAKS. While MacArthur and Carver earned *recognized* labels in SY04, the other three senior high schools dropped to *academically acceptable*. Concurrently, while the district's results on the TAKS science tests (which were given in grades 5, 8, 10 and 11) were low overall, some schools and verticals were beginning to make faster progress on the TAKS than others. In keeping with "the Aldine way," Kujawa was generally opposed to mandating that schools adopt specific implementation practices, although precedents did exist.

Looking Ahead

As Kujawa weighed her options, she grappled with the most serious challenge of her 41 year career with AISD. The educational and managerial approaches that had allowed the district to dramatically improve student achievement under TAAS were not producing the high levels of performance under TAKS that Kujawa desired. Reviewing the SY05 TAKS results, Kujawa was determined to lead the district to higher levels of success both quickly and deliberately. As Kujawa deliberated over her next steps, she reflected:

> I believe in "the Aldine way," meaning all of the systemic elements we put into place that enabled our students to excel over the past 10 years. However, as I look ahead, I suspect there are elements of the organization that need to be redefined in order to accelerate student performance again. My question is what to keep, tweak, or replace?

Exhibit 1 Timeline of Assessment, Standards, and Accountability in Texas

Year	Event
SY80	Texas Assessment of Basic Skills (TABS) introduced for reading, mathematics, and writing in grades 3, 5, and 9.
SY81	The Essential Elements, the first statewide K-12 content standards adopted.
SY84	Perot Commission issued recommendations, including annual state testing in all numbered grades, barring struggling students from athletics ("no pass, no play"), denying diplomas to students failing a high school exit exam, and mandating public accountability reports on student performance by district. Recommendations were enacted into law by House Bill 72.
SY86	Texas Education Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) replaced TABS in an effort to measure minimum rather than basic skills. TEAMS tested reading, math, and writing in grades 1, 3, 5, 7, 9 and 11. The 11th grade test was considered an exit exam and the Class of 1987 became the first cohort required to pass the exit exam in order to receive a diploma.
SY91	Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), the state's first criterion-referenced test, introduced to measure student's mastery of the Essential Elements. TAAS tested reading, math, and writing in grades 3, 5, 7, 9, and 11. TAAS results were disaggregated and reported by school, district, and state.
SY93	TAAS extended to grades 3–8 in reading and math; writing in grades 4 and 8; and the exit level exam was moved from grade 11 to 10.
SY94	District and school performance-based accountability rating system implemented. Ratings primarily based on TAAS passing rates.
SY98	Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) K-12 content standards replaced the Essential Elements.
SY02	Final year district and school accountability ratings based on TAAS results.
SY03	Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) test replaced TAAS. TAKS was administered for reading, writing, math, social studies, and science in grades 3-11. Passing standards increased each year from SY03-SY05 for grades 3-10, and from SY03-SY06 for grade 11. Districts and schools retained SY02 accountability ratings.
SY04	District and school accountability ratings based on TAKS results for the first year.
SY05	TAKS passing standards phase-in completed for grades 3–10.
SY06	TAKS passing standards phase-in completed for grade 11.

Source: Timeline of Testing in Texas, Achieve Three Paths One Destination: Standards-based Reform in Maryland, Massachusetts, and Texas; *Texas Public Schools 150 Years Sesquicentennial Handbook 1854–2005*.

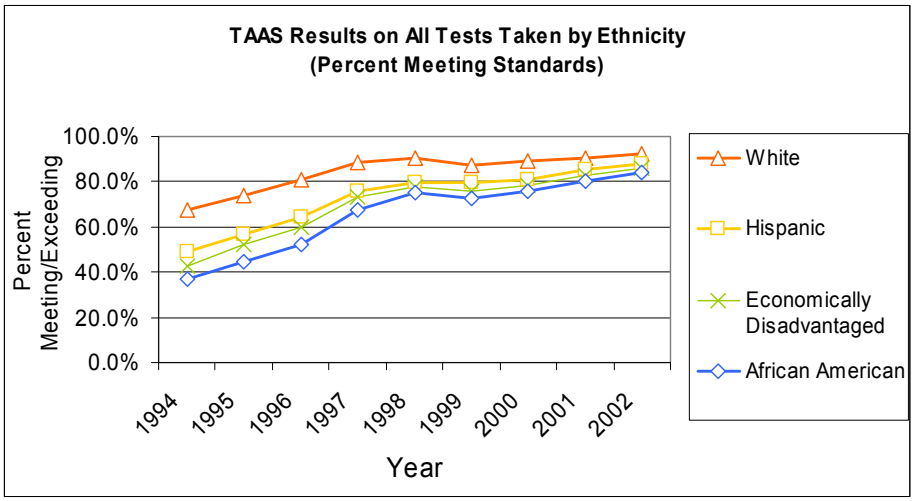
Exhibit 2 AISD Facts and Figures

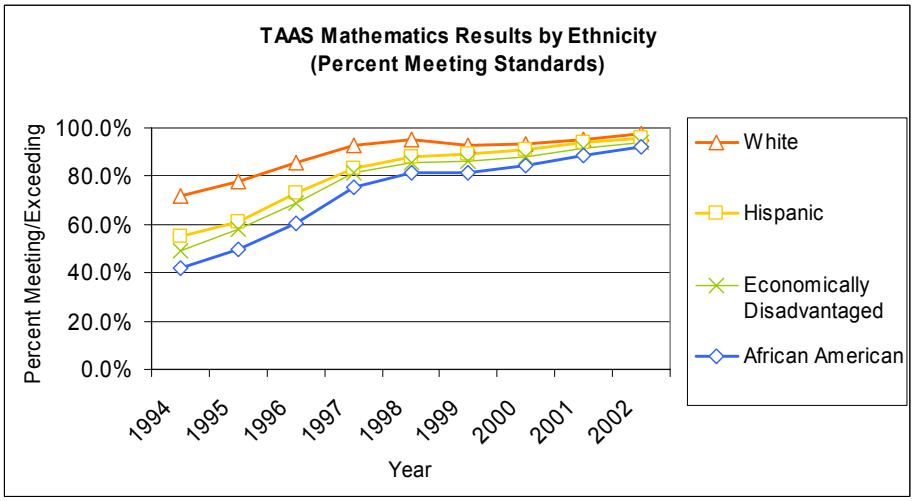
SY05 AISD Overview

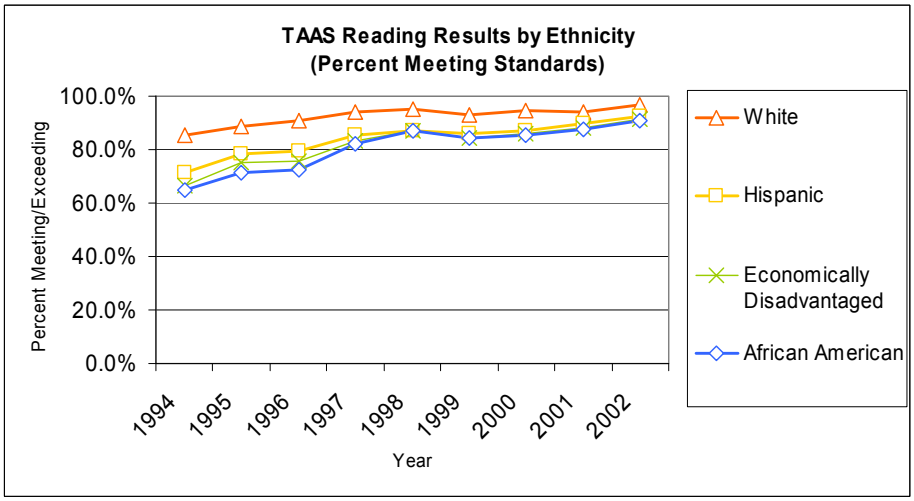
District Area Demographics (Census 2000)	
Total Population	221,223
Median household income	$33,291
Families below poverty level	17.5%
Percent of county residents holding bachelor degree or higher	18.6%
Student Demographics	
Number of students (PK–12)	56,127
Hispanic	58.0%
African-American	33.1%
White	6.4%
Asian/Pacific Islander	2.4%
Native American	0.1%
Economically Disadvantaged	76.6%
Limited English Proficient	24.9%
Special education students	9.8%
Graduation rate (4-year)	76.8%
Dropout rate (4-year)	4.3%
Schools and Staff (11th-largest district in TX)	
Number of schools	62
Early childhood/PK centers	5
Elementary (K-4)	29
Middle or Intermediate (5-6, 7-8)	17
Ninth grade (9)	4
Senior high (10-12)	5
Alternative	2
Total staff	7,522
Teachers	48.1%
Auxiliary Support (custodians, etc.)	27.7%
Educational Aides	13.7%
Professional Support (clerical staff, etc.)	6.7%
School Administration	2.9%
Central Administration	0.9%
Average teacher salary	$44,492
Average years experience of teachers	11
Teacher turnover rate	12.4%
Pupil/Teacher ratios	
PK–4	22:1
Gr. 5–6	28:1
Gr. 7–12	29:1

Source: Census 2000 data from http://www.nces.ed.gov/surveys/sdds/singledemoprofile.asp?county1=4807710&state1=48, accessed March 9, 2005. AISD data from *Texas Education Agency Academic Excellence Indicator System 2003-04 District Performance Report*. TEA Web site, http://www.tea.state.tx.us/cgi/sas/broker, accessed March 9, 2005. and *Aldine at a Glance, Information and Facts about the AISD in Houston, Texas.*

Exhibit 3 District TAAS Results, SY94–SY02







Source: Texas Education Agency, Academic Excellence Indicator System. Multi-year District Report for 1994–2002.

Exhibit 4 District and School Accountability Ratings by Vertical, SY94–SY04

	TAAS									TAKS	
	SY94	SY95	SY96	SY97	SY98	SY99	SY00	SY01	SY02-SY03	SY04	SY05
DISTRICT RATING	*Acad. Acceptable*	*Acad. Acceptable*	*Acad. Acceptable*	*Recognized*	*Recognized*	*Recognized*	*Recognized*	*Recognized*	*Recognized*	*Acad. Acceptable*	*Acad. Acceptable*
SCHOOL RATINGS (#):											
Exemplary	0	4	1	6	5	4	4	9	13	7	5
Recognized	0	15	9	20	20	19	32	31	31	28	16
Acad. Acceptable	42	20	34	19	20	25	15	11	7	20	31
Acad. Unaccept.	0	4	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	3
Not Rated-Other	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Total	44	45	47	47	47	50	53	53	53	57	57
SCHOOL RATINGS (#) BY VERTICAL:											
Aldine											
Exemplary	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2	1	1
Recognized	0	3	1	6	3	4	5	8	6	5	4
Acad. Acceptable	7	3	6	1	4	4	3	0	0	3	4
Acad. Unacceptable	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not Rated-Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	7	7	7	7	7	8	8	8	8	9	9
Carver											
Exemplary	0	0	0	0	0	1	1	3	2	1	1
Recognized	0	0	3	3	6	2	7	5	9	10	4
Acad. Acceptable	9	9	7	8	5	9	5	5	2	3	8
Acad. Unacceptable	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	1
Not Rated-Other	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	9	10	11	11	11	12	13	13	13	14	14
Eisenhower											
Exemplary	0	2	0	1	0	0	0	0	1	0	0
Recognized	0	6	1	2	4	3	5	6	5	4	2
Acad. Acceptable	8	0	7	5	4	6	4	3	3	7	9
Acad. Unacceptable	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not Rated-Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	8	8	8	8	8	9	9	9	9	11	11

	TAAS									TAKS	
	SY94	SY95	SY96	SY97	SY98	SY99	SY00	SY01	SY02-SY03	SY04	SY05
MacArthur											
Exemplary	0	2	1	4	3	2	2	5	7	4	3
Recognized	0	2	2	4	3	4	7	4	3	4	3
Acad. Acceptable	9	4	6	1	3	3	1	1	0	2	4
Acad. Unacceptable	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Not Rated-Other	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
Total	9	9	9	9	9	9	10	10	10	10	10
Nimitz											
Exemplary	0	0	0	1	2	1	1	1	1	1	0
Recognized	0	4	2	5	4	6	8	8	8	5	3
Acad. Acceptable	9	4	8	4	4	3	2	2	2	5	6
Acad. Unacceptable	0	1	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	2
Not Rated-Other	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2	2
Total	11	11	12	12	12	12	13	13	13	13	13

Source: Texas Education Agency Academic Excellence Indicator System District Reports, 1994–2004.

Note: Does not include pre-Kindergarten/early childhood centers.

Exhibit 5 Comparative SAT and 5th Grade ITBS Results

	Average SAT Scores for the U.S., Texas, and AISD (SY94–SY04)		
Year	***U.S.***	***Texas***	***AISD***
SY94	1,003	884	823
SY95	1,010	885	799
SY96	1,013	891	808
SY97	1,016	993	921
SY98	1,017	992	911
SY99	1,016	992	890
SY00	1,019	989	865
SY01	1,020	990	871
SY02	1,020	987	869
SY03	1,026	986	875
SY04	1,026	989	874

Source: District and State SAT Scores from the Academic Excellence Indicator System District Performance Reports, SY94–SY05, Texas Education Agency Web site, http.//www.tea.state.tx.us, accessed March 9, 2005; and National SAT scores from 2005 College Bound Seniors, A Summary Report from the College Board, http://www.collegeboard.com/prod_downloads/about/news_info/cbsenior/yr2005/ 2005_CBSNR_total_group.pdf, accessed March 9, 2005.

Note: In SY97, the SAT introduced a new testing format.

	Iowa Test of Basic Skills Results: AISD 5th Grade, All students (SY01–SY05)				
	SY01	***SY02***	***SY03***	***SY04***	***SY05***
Avg. Standard Score	198.6	N/A	200.0	200.2	198.1
Grade Equivalent	4.7	N/A	4.7	4.7	4.6
National Percentile Rank	39	N/A	40	41	38
# Tested	3,586	N/A	3,875	3,885	3,954

Source: District files.

Note: Core results include reading, language, and mathematics.

Exhibit 6 AISD TAKS Results by Student Subgroup, SY03–SY05

Percentage of all AISD students (grades 3–11) meeting standards on TAKS tests

	All Students (State)	All Students (District)	African American	Hispanic	White	Native American	Asian/ Pacific Islander	Special Education	Economic Disadvan-taged.	Limited English Proficient
TAKS Test										
Reading/ELA										
2005	83%	81%								
2004	80%	77%	74%	77%	86%	92%	86%	53%	75%	62%
2003	72%	69%	64%	70%	80%	89%	78%	48%	67%	55%
Mathematics										
2005	70%	71%								
2004	66%	63%	53%	66%	76%	74%	84%	39%	62%	60%
2003	57%	56%	47%	59%	68%	74%	79%	34%	55%	52%
Writing										
2005	89%	89%								
2004	89%	88%	85%	90%	87%	> 99%	92%	70%	87%	84%
2003	78%	78%	73%	80%	88%	60%	90%	49%	77%	69%
Science										
2005	66%	57%								
2004	56%	46%	38%	47%	71%	89%	71%	26%	43%	18%
2003	42%	31%	23%	30%	55%	67%	59%	12%	27%	8%
Soc Studies										
2005	88%	88%								
2004	84%	86%	84%	85%	95%	> 99%	95%	68%	84%	50%
2003	76%	76%	73%	76%	89%	71%	86%	59%	75%	39%
All Tests										
2005										
2004	57%	52%	43%	55%	66%	70%	72%	30%	51%	47%
2003	47%	43%	35%	45%	58%	71%	64%	24%	41%	37%

Source: 2003-2004 data cited from Texas Education Agency Academic Excellence Indicator System District Report 2004. 2005 data cited from preliminary Texas Education Agency reports. See www.tea.state.tx.us.

Note: All results were calculated using the 2005 TAKS passing standard to allow for longitudinal analysis. In 2003 and 2004, the 2005 standard was referred to as the "Panel Recommendation." "All Tests" and student subgroup data were unavailable for 2005 at the time of case publication.

Exhibit 7a AISD SY05 Scorecard -- District level

AISD utilized scorecards to coordinate and measure progress towards achieving the district's four strategic goals:

1. AISD will demonstrate sustained growth in student achievement;
2. AISD will recruit, employ, and retain a quality teaching, administrative, and support staff to attain excellence in student performance;
3. AISD will allocate resources to maximize excellence; and
4. AISD will increase and improve stakeholder partnerships and satisfaction.

The scorecards were intended to promote strategic alignment among activities at the district, vertical, school, and classroom level. District, vertical, and school leaders used the scorecards to measure results and evaluate effectiveness of activities and resources.

Exhibit **7a** is an excerpt from the AISD SY05 District Action Plan for Objective 1.

Objective 1:AISD will demonstrate sustained growth in student achievement. Owner: Wanda Bamberg

Goals	Measure	Targets	Milestones 1 year	Milestones 3-5 yr.
1.1 Align all processes to support student achievement	• Critical processes listed, mapped and cataloged	• September 2004	• As needed	• 100%
1.2 Improve, sustain, and support academic student performance at or beyond grade level	• TAKS, AYP	• 90% of students meeting passing standards • 3% or less difference between student groups	• Set by campus and area supts. • Set by campus and area supts.	• 90% • 3%
	• AYP	• 100% of all campuses meet requirements for Adequate Yearly Progress	• Set by campus and area supts.	• 100%
	• SAT	• SAT–1030	• 900-950	• 1030
	• Number/percent of students on Recommended Plan at 9th, 10th, 11th, & 12th grades	• 9th grade-95% • 10th grade-95% • 11th grade-95% • 12th grade-95%	• 9th gr,-90% • 10th gr.-90% • 11th gr.-90% • 12th gr.-80%	• 9th gr.-95% • 10th gr.-95% • 11th gr.-95% • 12th gr.-95%
	• Number/percent/baseline of students in AP classes	• Increase baseline-3765	• Increase	• Increase
1.4 Increase completion rate	• Attendance rate	• 97.5%	• 97%	• 97.5%
	• Drop-out rate	• Less than 1%	• <1%	• <1%

Source: District files.

Exhibit 7b AISD SY05 Scorecard – Vertical level

Exhibit **7b** is an excerpt from the Nimitz Vertical Action Plan, SY05

Objective: Nimitz Vertical team will demonstrate sustained growth in student achievement

Goal: Improve and sustain student performance at or beyond grade level

Owner: Area Superintendent/Principals

Action/Tasks	Students	Person Responsible	Measures of Success	Resource Allocation	Scheduled Dates for Action			
					Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
• Monitor student performance Targeted subject areas on each school Monitor LEP and special ed performance Close achievement gaps among student groups Disaggregate data and adjust plans for improvement	All	Principal and Area Superintendent	• TAKS • ITBS/Logramos • SDAA (state assessment for special education students) • SAT/ACT • TX scholars • Distinguished achievement • AP/Dual credit • Benchmark targets • Checkpoint tests					
• Visit schools to support academic achievement	All	Area Superintendent	• Leadership meetings • School visits					
• Implement strategies to increase number of students on grade level	All	Principal and Area Superintendent	• Benchmark assessments • ITBS • Verticalwide common assessment					

Source: District files.

Exhibit 7c AISD SY05 Scorecard – School level

Exhibit **7c** is an excerpt from the R.C. Conley Elementary (Nimitz Vertical) School Action Plan

Objective: Conley will demonstrate sustained growth in student achievement Owner: Principal/Conley stakeholders

Goal: Improve and sustain student performance at or beyond grade level.

Action/Tasks	Students	Person Responsible	Measures of Success	Resource Allocation	Scheduled Dates for Action			
					Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
• Monitor student performance for on/above grade level performance in all content areas Disaggregate data and adjust plans for improvement	All At Risk	Principal Ast. principal Skills specialists Teachers	• >90% Benchmark assessments • >90% TAKS • Walkthrough results	Title I Comp Ed				
• Implement strategies to increase number of students on grade level	All At Risk	Skills specialists Teachers	• >90% Benchmark assessments • >90% TAKS • Walkthrough results					
• Bridge gaps in academic performance between student groups	All At Risk	Principal	• < 5%					
• Monitor grade level action plans and scorecards	All	Principal Ast. principal	• Conference with administrator each 6 weeks					
• Meet weekly during grade levels common planning to discuss student performances, examine student work, discuss best practices	All At Risk	Principal, Ast. principal Skills specialists, teachers	• Agendas/sign-in sheets					
• Monitor classroom instruction for mastery and application of benchmark targets	All At Risk	Principal, Ast. principal Skills specialists	• >90% • Walkthrough results • Examine student work					

Source: Conley Elementary.

Exhibit 7d AISD SY05 Scorecard – Classroom level

Exhibit **7d** is an excerpt from the R.C. Conley Elementary Third Grade Reading Teachers Action Plan

Objective: Basic understanding, literacy elements, analyze critical thinking **Owner: Third grade reading teachers**

Goal: To improve performance to 90% or above for all students.

Action/Tasks	Students	Person Responsible	Measures of Success	Resource Allocation	Scheduled Dates for Action			
					Q1	Q2	Q3	Q4
• Consistently use Scott Forseman practice book which contains reading skills that have been identified as our deficits	All	Teachers	• Teacher-made (Friday) tests, and district benchmark tests					
• Consistently create and use TAKS "topper" as a warm-up, for the entire grade level. These activities cover all objectives and can be used to address specific skills deficits.	All	Teachers	• Teacher-made (Friday) tests, and district benchmark tests					
• Use Wednesday team meeting time to lesson plan. Reading teachers will meet, and bring ideas to implement specific skill deficits.	All	Teachers	• Teacher-made (Friday) tests, and district benchmark tests					

Source: Conley Elementary.

Exhibit 8 Demographic Data by Vertical, SY05

	Aldine	Carver	Eisenhower	MacArthur	Nimitz
Number of Students	10,078	11,417	11,639	10,183	13,047
White	4.3%	5.7%	3.4%	4.4%	9.9%
Hispanic	73.1%	52.8%	50%	82.3%	48.9%
Black	20.5%	39.3%	42.7%	12.7%	38.7%
Asian	2.0%	2.1%	3.9%	0.5%	2.3%
Indian	0.1%	0.1%	0.1%	-	0.2%
% Economically Disadvantaged	81.9%	76.7%	76.1%	82.9%	73.2%
% English Language Learners	36.9%	22.7%	21.6%	34.2%	19.9%
% Special Ed	9.1%	7.1%	10.2%	10.1%	12.4%

Source: District files.

Exhibit 9 Sample Benchmark Target: Third Grade Language Arts

ASSURANCES

By the end of third grade, the student will:

1. Write a narrative, informative and descriptive composition using story elements, correct sentence structure, punctuation, capitalization, and usage.
2. Identify nouns, verbs, adjectives, words with prefixes and suffixes, singular and plural possessives and contractions.
3. Develop and expand their vocabulary by analyzing alternative spellings for same sounds, silent consonants, syllabication and mastery of the Dolch and Fry Word List for third grade.
4. Spell a variety of words using rules/patterns and generalizations.
5. Read a lengthy literature selection fluently and be able to answer the following types of questions: identify the main idea, cause and effect, character feelings, sequential order, setting, predicting outcomes, summary, fact and details and be able to use context clues to identify unknown words.
6. Speak with fluency and understanding for different purposes and occasions using appropriate rate and volume.

LANGUAGE ARTS—FIRST SIX WEEKS:

Reading/comprehension. The student uses a variety of strategies to comprehend selections read aloud and selections read independently. (TEKS 3.9)

36. Use prior knowledge to anticipate meaning and make sense of texts. (TEKS 3.9A) ***Develop, Master***
37. Establish purposes for reading and listening such as to be informed, to follow directions, and to be entertained. (TEKS 3.9B) ***Develop, Master***
38. Retell or act out the order of events in stories. (TEKS 3.9C/TAKS Obj. #1, 3) ***Develop, Master***
39. Act purposefully when comprehension breaks down using such strategies as re-reading, searching for clues, and asking for help. (TEKS 3.9D) ***Develop, Master***
40. Make/explain inferences from texts to predict outcomes and determine important ideas, causes and effects, and drawing conclusions. (TEKS 3.9F/TAKS Obj. #4) ***Develop, Master***
41. Produce summaries of a selection. (TEKS 3.9H/TAKS Obj. #1) ***Develop, Master***
42. Represent text information in different ways, including story maps, graphs, and charts. (TEKS 3.9I/TAKS Obj. #3) ***Develop, Master***
43. Distinguish fact from opinion. (TEKS 3.9J/TAKS Obj. #4) ***Introduce, Develop, Master***
44. Practice different kinds of tasks and questions. (TEKS 3.9K) ***Develop, Master***

Exhibit 10 AISD Teachers by Years of Experience, 1994–2004

	1994	2004
Number of Teachers	2,716	3,616
Years of Experience		
0–5	45.0%	37.5%
6–10	16.4%	20.4%
11–20	27.8%	24.1%
20+	10.7%	18.0%

Source: Texas Education Agency Academic Excellence Indicator System District Reports, 1994–2004.