

**Update Memo:
Standards-Based Middle School Reform
Corpus Christi Independent School District, Texas
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Background

On August 30, 1996 we submitted a baseline evaluation report describing the status of middle school reform in Corpus Christi Independent School District (CCISD). The report resulted from an examination of school and district level change in the spring of 1996. To quote the introduction of our report:

We believe that CCISD's implementation [of the standards] process is well-organized and thorough. The district demonstrates a strong commitment to implementing standards in middle schools across the district. Without exception, building-based administrators and central office staff view standards as the center of reform and increasingly use them as a way to guide other programs and initiatives....

Across the district, depending on capacity and need, schools use a variety of approaches to implement standards. Increasingly, teachers are learning the new language associated with standards and new forms of pedagogy; they have adopted some of the language of performance standards and tasks, scoring guidelines, higher-order thinking skills, and real-life applications. This is a first necessary step for reforming instruction and assessment; it is a precursor to actually changing learning environments and classroom practice.

On the basis of interviews, classroom observations, and a review of secondary data prepared by the district, we found that teachers from our four sample schools (Browne, Cullen, Grant and Wynn Seale) viewed standards as "potentially" useful for guiding their classrooms, and identified some early impacts of standards on curriculum, instruction, and assessment. These included more student-centered approaches, moving away from sole reliance on textbooks and lecturing, decreasing the amount of student testing, more frequent efforts at interdisciplinary lessons and units, and use of multiple strategies within the classroom (more cooperative groups and greater use of manipulatives, oral presentations and products). In spite of adopting some of these approaches, in our observations of classrooms we saw limited use of these newer forms of pedagogy and only a few pockets of innovation and exemplars of high level standards-based instruction.

In interviews in the four middle schools, teachers reported less isolation than before, and more regular collaboration with colleagues in their buildings. Much of their conversation focused on the mechanics of standards implementation (logistics, set up, and monitoring), with less attention to student thinking, student learning, and student work. We did not find this surprising given the newness of standards implementation, therefore, we identified this as an area that would hopefully

change over time.

At the district level, we found that staff focused much of their energy and time on planning, implementation, and professional development related to academic standards. Implementation is always a difficult process, but with the strong site-based management in Texas, it becomes even more complex an undertaking. Nonetheless, district staff provided leadership, resources, and support to principals and teachers in a way that seemed to meet the early needs at the building level.

Much of the central office staffs' work centered on the development and early implementation of academic standards and the piloting of scoring guides. (The scoring guides were particularly controversial.) However, we saw less focus on incentives or policies that would encourage new organizational features of middle schools (teams, advisories, flexible scheduling) or promote new forms of interaction (student grouping patterns, parent participation, community involvement) to support reform. We emphasized in our baseline report that standards are but one component of the systemic reforms needed to support higher student performance.

In summary, based on our visits in school year 1995-1996, we found one of the greatest obstacles to standards-based reform to be the "schizophrenia" surrounding the state's primary reliance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS). A high number of middle school teachers and administrators still do not believe that good standards-based instruction will lead to acceptable student performance on TAAS. This leads to excessive anxiety as well as a lot of test preparation and drilling for large time periods prior to TAAS administration. Explicit acknowledgment of the tensions for individual schools to reconcile the two efforts seems important. And as we mentioned in our baseline report, guidance from the district concerning ways to meet both goals with integrity is critical to the successful standards implementation.

Introduction to Site Visit, Fall 1996

With the previous year's visit as background, the evaluation team returned to CCISD in November, 1996. Barbara Brauner Berns, Susan Markowitz and Terry Jones Trandem, our new local evaluator, visited the four sample schools, each spending one day per site interviewing the principal and interviewing and observing teachers. (In some cases, Trandem also did follow-up visits.) The purpose of all visits was to learn more about CCISD's progress with standards-based reform. Thirty-six teachers make up our sample; they represent individuals across language arts, math, social studies and, science in grades 6-8. Identified by their principals as teachers with a willingness and interest in "moving forward," this was a second interview and observation for most of these individuals. At each school, we also met with several student groups in order to better understand how students are thinking about their school experience and standards-based reform.

At the district level, the evaluation team wanted to learn about the administrators' perceptions of the progress and challenges of implementing standards-based reform. The capacity and functions of the central office staff are key to moving the reform forward. It is essential to examine these conditions now, because without strong and consistent support at the district level, it is unlikely that principals and teachers will be able to address the standards in ways that will result in improved student

learning. Therefore, we met with the assistant superintendent for instruction and operations, director of academics, coordinator for academic standards, coordinator of professional development, and the math curriculum consultant. In addition, we interviewed the president of the local teachers' union.

Information from our previous evaluation visit and a review of materials developed by the district or individual schools provided the core of our interview protocols for this visit. We hope that our initial findings will inform on-going conversations about standards-based reforms within the district, within the schools, and between the district and the schools.

An Introductory Note. Before we begin, we remind readers that this document is a memo; it is not a comprehensive analysis of all of the data we collected in CCISD in November. Our next report, due late in summer, will reflect all of the data collected during the Spring 1996, Fall 1996, and Spring, 1997 visits to Corpus Christi.

Overview

Our November 1996 visit indicated that CCISD continues to move forward with determination and enthusiasm. Their goal continues to be having 90% of the Grade 8 students reaching academic standards in language arts, math, social studies, and science by June 2001. Last year, administrators and teachers talked a lot about the “mechanics” of standards, and we expressed concern about the lack of attention to the implications of standards for teaching and learning. This year Dr. Lerma, assistant superintendent for instructional operations, sees change in a positive direction:

Teachers and principals are actually talking about things they should be talking about: instruction and learning. They're having dialogues...I didn't see much of that before. So we're raising the level of consciousness.

CCISD is on a fast track, and it is hard to keep up this pace. We did not, therefore, find it surprising that in its quarterly report to the Foundation, the authors pointed out that many principals, teachers, students, and parents indicate concerns about “implementation being too much, too soon.” In spite of this, the district keeps going and adding to its comprehensive agenda.

There has been incredible activity since our previous evaluation visit. For this update, however, we want to focus on districtwide initiatives that seem most closely related to classroom practice,

leading to more rigorous instruction and improved student performance. These include:

- C Developing and revising standards in academic and other curriculum areas;
- C Revising and implementing scoring guidelines with ongoing review and analysis;
- C Tackling the issue of grading guidelines;
- C Administering the first standards-based summer school;
- C Building on the successful piloting of Algebra for All; and
- C Supporting professional development.

Districtwide Initiatives and Issues

Developing and revising standards in academic and other curriculum areas

During the summer, as reported in our previous report, teachers met to revise the standards. This fall, they began a serious effort at standards implementation. Working with department colleagues or members of their grade level teams, teachers tried to develop appropriate ways to teach the content standards and engage students with the performance standards. As they experienced problems or confusion with the standards implementation, they used the district's hot line or fax line for support. This is a strong vehicle because of the rapid responses teachers receive from curriculum consultants. The district position is to do almost anything they can to support teachers because, according to Mary Kelly, coordinator for academic standards, "We want to make believers out of teachers. We are listening to what you say."

In CCISD, the union marches to the same tune. They have played an important role in reviewing draft standards, critiquing them, and then helping to disseminate information within the district. Union representatives educated the teachers about standards, emphasizing why they need to "move in this direction." Support has been public because, according to Linda Bridges, the union president, "We've always felt it's the right thing to do: to be able to tell the public, this is what your child should learn and be able to do by grade level, by subject matter. It's just our feeling it's a common sense approach."

We heard from district and building level administrators that the majority of academic teachers are using the standards to drive class instruction. With the exception of social studies, teachers in the district appear to be fairly satisfied with the standards. (We will interview the social studies consultant during our next visit, and hope to better understand this situation.) CCISD is now moving into the development of fine arts and vocational education standards. In terms of physical education, an effort is underway to ensure that the physical education curriculum is more in line with the standards.

Our general sense of the academic standards, based on the views of national educators and our own experience in other sites, is that in ensuring compatibility with TAAS, the CCISD standards have not placed as high a priority on problem-solving and complex analysis as we have seen in other districts. However, we hope, and have every reason to believe, that as teachers get more comfortable with new ways of instruction, and feel more secure about students doing well on TAAS, CCISD will begin to revisit and upgrade the standards and as appropriate, raise the level of expectation for middle grade students.

Revising the district scoring criteria and guidelines

In last year's report, we echoed concerns of teachers about the inadequacy of newly developed scoring guidelines. Revisions occurred, this time on the basis of analyzing actual student work. According to Dr. Garza, director of academics, this process provided an excellent experience for participating teachers, "making them so much richer in the knowledge of what it means to look at

pieces of work. It's almost like it was staff development in itself...It made people immerse themselves in what standards are and how to judge them, realizing they're here to stay."

The purpose of the scoring guidelines is to help guide teachers in reflecting on students' work and determine the quality of that work. This is a complex issue and teachers have overriding concerns about consistency. Therefore, a teacher group revised the scoring criteria substantially. They decided not to limit scores to the broad criteria to be used for scoring products and performances. Instead, they decided to develop points for every specific sub-criteria used to measure achievement of every standard. These are designed to give more definition to performance standards. For example, a performance standard for grade 7 mathematics is to graph similar figures using rotations, reflections and translations, and verify coordinates of vertices. As criteria, the student must write coordinates for the vertices of the given polygon (2 problems, 10 points), graph a rotation of the given polygon and give correct coordinates of the polygon and given correct coordinates of the vertices (2 problems, 15 points), etc. It is an individual campus decision whether to use the point system.

Teachers vary in their response to these detailed scoring guides. We found three different groups in our sample schools. First, we found a group of teachers who find the scoring guides useful and like the specificity of the point system. Second, we identified some of the more creative teachers who find the guides constraining and want to change them. Third, we met teachers who believe that criteria will help them, but find the current scoring guides too cumbersome to use. This large group of teachers complains that the guides have led to a huge paperwork burden. In fact, several teachers said it was "driving them crazy." The most prevalent feedback to date is that teachers like the scoring criteria, but want to change the point value. In true CCISD form, the curriculum teams are willing to go back to the drawing board and re-examine the point values.

According to Dr. Lerma, the next step will be "to move towards really trying to help teachers define quality; what's exceptional quality. We'll probably go to a 4, 3, 2, 1, something like that. I think that's going to take time in this district, but that's where we are moving." Mary Kelly, who oversees the standards effort, echoes this view when she says "we're probably going to come full circle and probably get them where they're more like rubrics."

Consultants provided by the Foundation's grant to the Council for Basic Education recently worked with district teachers on the development of rubrics. They showed teachers how to go through different steps to determine what they value in student work. Experiences such as these provide an additional lens for district curriculum staff and teachers to assess their own efforts. As we said in our baseline report, developing these instruments is extremely difficult and requires the best thinking among educators within and outside the district. Therefore, we cannot over-emphasize the importance of continual revision of scoring guidelines, and the inclusion of critical friends and outside experts, with experience in alternative assessments, to assist in the development and review processes.

Tackling the issue of grading guidelines

CCISD realizes the need for a new grading system that gives credence to the academic standards,

and emphasizes achievement of performance standards. As a result, it is tackling the issue of grading, trying to figure out how grades can be more meaningful and actually reflect what is being taught and what's being learned. People unanimously seem to feel that today an A in one place is certainly not an A in another place. So, CCISD has started this discussion of grading at both district and individual school levels.

This fall the schools used newly developed progress reports that “push” the concept of academic standards. In the past, students received progress reports if they were failing a course or were borderline in math, English, science, or social studies. This year, progress reports specify what standards within the content area are problematic for students. This provides a way to show why students are not achieving, and provides parents with information on exactly what performance standards students need to be able to do in order to pass. Likewise, writing the progress reports re-emphasizes to teachers that they really must teach to the standards and assess the students' abilities to demonstrate knowledge of the standards. Through the progress reports, the district is trying to tie academic achievement grades to performance standards.

In one school we visited, the principal talked about holding teachers accountable for students' performance. If too many students in a particular class receive failures, the principal and the teacher look over the situation in the classroom, the instructional strategies used, and students' learning styles. We found this impressive because it points out the responsibility of both the teacher and student for ensuring high standards are met.

Last year some schools piloted a grading process that required them to give students a certain percentage for performance standards, and another percentage for daily work (quizzes, homework, class assignments and participation, etc.) This year some of the middle schools are weighing grades at 50% for performance standards and 50% for other. However, this, too, is a campus decision.

Administering the first standards-based summer school

Middle school students who failed (or refused to “do”) specific performance standards during the 1995-1996 school year had the opportunity to attend summer school and “redo” particular performance standards. (Unlike previous years, students did not have to attend the whole summer; instead, they attended until they were able to satisfactorily achieve the performance standard in question.) If they passed the performance standard(s) in summer school, teachers averaged that grade with their yearly grade.

Summer school's emphasis on standards demonstrates the district's serious position with regard to implementation. It also, according to many administrators and teachers, “raised the community's awareness of the importance of standards.” In some situations the actual threat of summer school for failing performance standards was enough to motivate students to do better in school.

The summer school also helped teachers to target specific standards, thereby allowing them to focus on alternative approaches for instruction and assessment of students. One teacher called it a laboratory for her own efforts at standards implementation. However, the district found it difficult

to find middle school teachers for the summer school, primarily because these teachers had a lot of opportunities for their own professional development and growth. As a response to this situation, the district could link teachers' summer professional development courses (including college courses) to actual summer school teaching. Courses for teachers could directly relate to developing alternative strategies for teaching the standards that are covered during summer school. This would provide a way for teachers to develop strategies, implement them, reflect upon them, and assess their effectiveness with the students. Likewise, professional development programs during the year could tie-in summer school teaching into their course work. In terms of college courses, this could also serve as a way to begin connecting teacher preparation classes to the standards-based reforms of CCISD.

Planning for adoption of Algebra for All by additional middle schools

Middle school performance in mathematics is of high priority to CCISD. However, much of the math instruction is traditional, with teachers frequently using drill and practice, teaching math “out of context.” These teachers rarely use manipulatives, encourage writing, or promote problem-solving. There are exceptions, however, and math consultant Lucio Calzado is on a quest to identify who they are, and recruit them to pilot new models of instruction and new curriculum materials. He believes that all students can attain high standards, and his challenge is to convince teachers and the students that this is possible. He thinks seeing application-based instruction helps to convince them. One principal voiced the view of the others by pointing out that “if we put the expectation there, we can see them [the students] rise in their output.”

It is within this context that last year Grant Middle School, one of our sample sites, piloted Algebra for All. This program requires extensive professional development and preparation for teachers, and the use of engaging and research-effective strategies in the classroom. Grant had opened a few years before as a school with “high expectations” for both teachers and students. It had several conditions that made it a good pilot site: a strong and committed principal; active participation by the parent community; teachers who were willing to reflect on their teaching practice and make changes as necessary; and a culture that supported risk-taking and experimentation. At the district level, the curriculum consultant believed in the program and had high expectations for the participating teachers and students. What’s more, he was willing to spend an incredible amount of time on-site providing support wherever and whenever necessary.

As a result of Algebra for All participation, Grant no longer offers courses in math 6, 7 and 8. (These still exist at other middle schools.) The only courses given at Grant are algebra preparatory; algebra 1A and 1B, which are two years of algebra for one high school credit; algebra 1, a one year course; and geometry for high school credit. Students performed very well on last year’s end of the course exam. The passing rate was 71%, as compared to the state average of 28%. In addition, student scores rose on TAAS, confirming the principal’s view that good instruction (that comes from Algebra for All) would lead to higher scores. This has been an important acknowledgment in a district that has a tradition of heavily preparing students for TAAS.

Watching this experience led many other middle schools to request participation in Algebra for All.

In order to get it up and running next year, Browne and Cullen, two of our sample schools, have already begun some planning and preparation. (Wynn Seale will come on board the following year.) They will have to use block scheduling in order to ensure the best conditions for successful implementation. So, too, the training must be buildingwide and the administrators and teachers have to be willing to make a strong commitment. There is an incredible amount of professional development, all of which requires teachers to be actively engaged as learners themselves. To quote Mr. Calzado: “This is not going to be easy. The kids are going to have to struggle; they’re going to have to work hard. The teachers will have to work hard. It scares a few folks off.”

The planning for Algebra for All is a collaborative effort between the school staff and district office. Therefore, the program at each school will ultimately look a little different. Consultants from outside of the system conduct much of the intensive training, and the district supplies additional print and non-print resources for the Algebra for All classes.

We are confident that these other middle schools will provide supportive environments for Algebra for All. Wynn Seale, once a “disestablished school,” now houses an outstanding arts program; Cullen is the only middle school in the district with an integrated technology program; and Browne is the originator of student-led conferences, a model which other middle schools are now replicating. Like Grant, all have sound administrative leadership, and strong groups of teacher leaders.

Ongoing districtwide professional development

CCISD understands that to move forward the standards agenda, principals and teachers need to learn new forms of pedagogy and new ways to carry out their work. In the future, they may also discover that teachers will need additional support in their respective academic disciplines. While we have not heard major concerns about teachers’ subject matter knowledge, the experiences of other districts may provide a barometer. If this is the case, it is not too early to begin conversations about teachers’ needs.

The district’s major effort to assist teachers in addressing academic standards in the classroom is The Curriculum Project. As discussed in our last report, this intensive support offers teachers a format and way to address standards through a matrix of moving from the basics to the concrete, from the simple to the complex. We understand that a considerable amount of attention focuses on critical and creative thinking, a definite strength of the program. Designed as a districtwide program, more recently schools have requested (and some have piloted) a site-based component. This entails training for teachers on-site, as well as more classroom observations and feedback.

Our sense is that teachers generally find The Curriculum Project helpful in developing a common language to talk about instruction and as a structure for designing standards-based curriculum units that can help them to teach students with a range of abilities and skills. We see evidence of teachers’ applying this new knowledge in their classrooms and hear that it is particularly useful in the development of interdisciplinary or integrated units. For the first time, we heard about the camera training. This allows administrators and teachers to take a series of sequenced pictures that show teaching strategies which are then built into “vignettes.” This is an interesting approach, but we

suggest these be used judiciously to highlight exemplary practice or more likely, provide a tool for analyzing new teaching models.

Since the district has made a sizeable investment in The Curriculum Project (largely through Foundation dollars), it would be valuable to 1) consider ways to use the teacher leaders and/or curriculum consultants to provide additional support to their colleagues; 2) ensure that units developed are of high quality; 3) assess in a methodical way whether teachers use the curriculum units they develop, use ones designed by peers, or use the process for designing new units; and 4) evaluate the program to determine if it continues to meet the teachers' needs and the district's overall goals.

CCISD also supports professional development through other district initiatives. Many principals have participated in districtwide training on total quality methods and they find almost immediate school applicability for the strategies learned. The district also supported mathematics teachers' participation in the Torch Institute this past summer. We did not hear much about it during our fall visit.

As the district moves forward, we suggest that it might want to begin exploring other forms of professional development. Site-based strategies that promote teacher leadership and professional learning communities within the schools might be valuable. In order to better use the standards to drive instruction, teachers might benefit from approaches such as study groups, peer observations and coaching, and collaborative analysis of student work. Explorations of strategies such as these might also provide a first step in the development of a comprehensive professional development plan to advance districtwide standards-based middle school reform. Such a plan, to be effective, would seek a balance between districtwide and school-based professional development. We think that CCISD has the talent and foresight to develop such a plan.

School Initiatives and Issues

Principal leadership

Principals in our four schools continue to grow in their own understanding of standards-based reform, and the skills for encouraging changes in the teaching and learning in their buildings. (The campus action plans become a blueprint for the individual school.) The central office continues to work with the principals in setting building-level expectations for standards implementation through modeling successful approaches, sharing effective classroom practices, and dissemination of site-based professional development programs. The principals, as well, work among themselves on joint projects and programs. As principals become more comfortable and knowledgeable, according to Rosaena Garza, director of academics, "the rubber is hitting the road." She recognizes that "we must support teachers and give them the license to risk something different."

Principals struggle with the best ways to support teachers who are trying to change their classroom practice to improve student performance. Sometimes they find different ways to do supervision; other times they use faculty meetings and department meetings to discuss issues of teaching and

learning. A few of the principals developed instruments for doing “walk throughs” and these include looking for evidence of students using critical or higher thinking skills. It is the follow-up to these visits which, of course, are most important. When administrators see weaknesses, they may work with teachers themselves. They also might bring in district curriculum consultants to help teachers strengthen their skills or improve their subject matter knowledge. While teachers often tell us how busy the curriculum consultants are, they seem able to identify specific individuals who support their schools, meet with department teams, or provide them with new resources or ideas.

Culture for standards-based reform

Regardless of the starting point for each school, standards implementation usually demonstrates steady, and often uphill, progress from last year’s experiences. Teaching to the standards requires a different way of thinking for teachers, and a different way of learning for students. In order to implement standards, schools have undertaken many different initiatives, some of which we mention in this report.

During this second year of implementation, the school climate is much more supportive of change. Our sample schools vary in terms of demographics and vision, but each principal can describe how the environment seems different this year. For instance, Dick Peltz, principal of Wynn Seale, tells us:

Last year was an awareness of the performance standards, the awareness that the campus was going to have to do some pedagogical changes. So this year the standards came into place. And where we are is the most exciting part since I’ve been here. We’re in the middle of bedlam but we are seeing for the first time ever in any classroom, some change. And it’s due to the standards. And it’s due to the products. And it’s due to people at least talking about teaching...They’re starting to question themselves about what’s right and what’s wrong.

Likewise, last year set the stage for Cullen, as principal Richard Harbin explains:

We’re at the point right now where I think we can begin to settle in on these initiatives and start becoming comfortable with them. Take the academic standards. Ultimately, they should positively affect student achievement. That’s the bottom line...They are good because they are starting to tell kids and teachers and parents what they need to know. It’s very straightforward: you need to know them or you don’t go on.

Last year’s efforts, which seemed minimal at the time, already have impacted student learning, as described by Browne principal, Raymond Davis:

As I look at some of the products the kids are producing, and as I read some of the papers kids are writing, you can see that our kids are much stronger today than even a year ago. We’re nowhere close to what we are capable of becoming, but I think we’re on the road to getting there.

The beginning evidence is apparent at all of the schools. At Grant, Maggie Ramirez, principal, shares her experience:

I used to go into the classrooms and see the lecture approach...Now I see more of the cooperative learning approach, kids in groups and all of that...I used to see just dittos, where now I'm seeing more products and group work.

Changes in Classrooms

Principals and teachers talked with us about changes in instruction, driven largely by the need for students to achieve standards in the academic areas. We share their view of movement in a positive direction, and noticed greater encouragement and support for the use of strategies that have the potential to improve student performance. These include active learning approaches, cooperative groups, the use of literature circles and the centers approach, writing across the curriculum, and better integration of technology with the curriculum areas. Schools are also getting better about using the school schedule to support curriculum rather than control it. In addition, we have seen the beginning of schools looking at the role of counselors, and seeing if they can reshape that position to be more focused on the improvement of academics.

While our four sample schools are quite different, for the purpose of this update and to retain the sites' anonymity, we describe our observations in the aggregate. In terms of teacher practice, we found the following situations:

- C Increasing numbers of teachers claim that standards are defining what is being taught, while providing them with direction and a focus. Since standards serve as a tool to unify the teaching within a classroom, teachers are beginning to understand that they can no longer teach whatever they want (or like) if it does not link with the standards. Teachers talked about this a lot, and within the context of its importance in a district like CCISD which has such high student mobility.
- C Standards require teachers to present students with real world problems, with more of the student work focused on the students' backgrounds and experiences. Likewise, the teachers' use of standards seem to encourage more hands-on work, as opposed to paper and pencil activities for instruction and assessment. While last year the jury was out on whether this approach actually helped teachers to understand their students' learning, this year teachers expressed more optimism.
- C In spite of this progress, for many teachers, their instructional approach remains very teacher-centered, with teachers lecturing most of the time. A good first step would be to increase the opportunities teachers have to observe others teaching, particularly those who are using more active learning and student-centered approaches. The use of facilitator-led study groups for teachers to critique samples of student work might lead teachers to look more reflectively on their own practice.

- C Teachers increasingly use a variety of instructional strategies in their classrooms. However, on the basis of our classroom observations, students did not seem truly excited by their work. One way to make performance standards more meaningful is to combine the work with some form of field work, community service or long-term efforts. These often clarify the purpose of learning for students. They help immerse students into their topic, extend their thinking, and build teamwork skills. Field work which includes investigation out of the school building as well as research, generally engages all of the students including those who are traditionally low performing.
- C Teachers did not frequently mention meeting during a block of time in school or on a regular basis before or after school to discuss student work. For significant changes in teaching strategies to occur, teachers need to discuss their work and commit to doing this over a long period of time. Schools need to have time built into the day or arranged outside of school, and sanctioned by the district.
- C Teachers who have students for extended blocks of time frequently could talk about their students in more depth than those who taught classes of traditional length of 50 minutes. They talked about having more time to explore topics in greater depth and for students to interact and learn from each other. If this view is shared by the district, it could establish a framework to discuss scheduling changes in other schools.
- C In their effort to use performance standards and follow the scoring guidelines to the “letter,” we sensed that some teachers are stifling student creativity. When we walked through the halls in several schools, many of the products looked identical. There could be no better assistance than participation in teacher-led workshops that show how teachers do creative lessons that lead up to creative student products.
- C In talking with teachers about grading, a small number of teachers talked about raising students’ grades to insure a majority passes their performance standards. If this is common (and we hope it is not), it would suggest that teachers are figuring out ways to get around the mandated scoring guidelines. Even if this is not commonplace, it means that teachers need to spend more time working together on ways to reach the lowest performing students.
- C Some teachers continue to feel divided between preparation for TAAS and the standards. They are plagued by issues related to “coverage”: how to cover everything in such a short time. They still do not believe there is a strong correlation between standards and TAAS skills.
- C Most parent communication and outreach activities include an emphasis on standards. Some of the more creative and potentially effective strategies are student-led conferences, the use of student portfolios, and quality product/performance fairs held by individual middle schools. The quality of the students’ products vary greatly according to principals’ judgments as well as our own. However, the process of students sharing their work with parents is in itself a wonderful learning experience. Schools use different approaches and one

we find particularly valuable requires students to go over [with their parents] what they have done well in each of their core classes and electives. Then they present things that have not met their expectations, where they have not done well enough, and areas in which they will need help. Because this coincides with report card day, parent turn out is high. Since we have not observed these conferences, we do not know the “way” in which students actually talk about their work with parents or the way teachers work with students to prepare for the conferences. Nonetheless, it is a good step forward and could serve as a model for other schools.

- C Schools were inconsistent in their display of student work and products. When displays are standards-based and of high quality, they provide exemplars for students and samples of excellence for teachers.

More attention on low performing students

Each school struggles with ways to serve their lowest performing students. The district has synthesized the approaches of all middle schools (as described in their campus action plans) and shared them at a recent principals’ meeting. A variety of strategies have emerged: cross grade level grouping with students, enrichment periods to work on performance standards that have not been achieved, the use of parent and community volunteers, and tutorials before and after school. It will be important for the district to assess these programs and examine their impact on student learning. Likewise, schools need to make sure these are not only add-ons, but that they connect closely with the work of the regular school day and program.

In order to meet the needs of all students, individual campuses are also giving more attention to creative scheduling. Because of site-based autonomy, school councils can decide how they want to structure the school day. We expect that this will become increasingly important as teachers better understand the ways their classroom instruction will need to change.

Summary

These examples highlight aspects of on-going standards reform in CCISD. We look forward to returning to the district this spring to learn more about progress in these and other areas. We continue to find impressive the district’s dedication to its students and its commitment to standards-based reform.