

Executive Summary

Case Studies of Schools Implementing

the Texas Middle School Program for AP* Spanish

2003-04

Prepared by

Resources for Learning, LLC

for the

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In 2000, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) received a grant from the U.S. Department of Education to implement the Texas Middle School Program for AP* Spanish. The program was designed to encourage the teaching of AP Spanish Language at the middle school level for Spanish-speaking students who were also identified as economically disadvantaged. The goal was to promote student success and self-confidence and support student aspirations and preparation for college.

Seven districts piloted the program and established AP Spanish Language courses in 17 middle schools across the state. These pilot districts varied greatly in resources, student population, size, and location. Building on the success of the pilot program, in 2002, TEA applied for additional funding from the U.S. Department of Education's Advanced Placement Incentive Program to expand the project to 13 additional scale-up sites. The campuses selected to participate in the scale-up project received one-year planning grants to lay the groundwork for implementation in the 2003-04 school year.

In April and May of 2004, Resources for Learning, LLC, (RFL), an Austin, Texas-based education consulting company, conducted case studies at three of the scale-up campuses implementing the program. The purpose of the case studies was to gain insight into implementation issues as campuses with differing characteristics worked to establish programs at their schools.

Each case study provides a brief profile of the campus and district and includes data outlining individual campus programs obtained from interviews, student focus groups, and a review of campus program documents. A summary of findings highlights key issues schools and districts might consider carefully as they work to create and implement similar programs for their students.

Study Sites

TEA program staff selected case study sites to represent different geographic locations across the state as well as a variety of campus types and sizes. The campus sites chosen for the case study were located in a rural school district (School 1), a suburban school district in a major urban area (School 2), and a school in a central Texas city (School 3).

TEA classifies School 1's district as Non-Metro: Stable—districts that have a number of students in membership that exceeds the state median but do not meet the criteria for Urban, Suburban, Central City, Independent Town, or Non-Metro: Fast Growing.¹

School 2's district is classified as Major Urban—districts that serve the state's six metropolitan areas. Major urban districts are districts with the greatest membership in

¹ The Texas Education Agency classifies districts as “community types” ranging from Major Urban to Rural based on factors such as size, growth rates, student economic status, and proximity to urban areas. Source: *Snapshot 2002—2001-02 School District Profiles published by the Texas Education Agency and available on the web at <http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/snapshot/2002/pdf/snap02.pdf>*

counties with populations of 650,000 or more and more than 35% of the students are identified as economically disadvantaged.

School 3's district is classified as Other Central City—a major school district in a large, but not major, Texas city. These districts are usually the largest districts in counties with populations between 100,000 and 650,000 and are not contiguous to any major urban districts.

Methodology

An RFL researcher visited each selected campus for two days to conduct interviews and focus groups with staff and students and to obtain relevant documentation.

Interviews. The researcher conducted interviews at each campus with key individuals involved with the program. Participants at each campus were identified in advance with the assistance of school and district personnel and included principals, AP Spanish teachers, middle school counselors, and students enrolled in the AP Spanish Language classes. Other individuals interviewed varied from site to site depending upon their involvement in the program. The researcher conducted 19 individual interviews during the three site visits using interview guides with structured, open-ended questions. Separate interview questions were created for administrators and teachers, and interviews were usually one hour in length. The researcher recorded interviews manually and through audio recording. Audiotapes of selected interviews were transcribed; however manual field notes served as the primary data record used for analysis.

Focus groups. Focus group sessions at each campus involved three to five students (12 students total were interviewed), and each student provided a parental and individual consent form. The focus groups were taped, were approximately one hour in length, and were conducted around tables with everyone seated facing each other to facilitate conversation.

Document review. School and district staff provided relevant documentation—program brochures, copies of board policies, parent meeting information, and newspaper articles—about program activities at each of the case study sites. Documentation clarified information gained from interviews and corroborated the researcher's understanding of local policies and procedures.

Site Summaries

School 1 is in a rural district serving a small student population and an even smaller Hispanic student group. The school had difficulty finding a teacher to teach the course and did not have a well-developed Spanish program at either the middle or high school. They selected a first-year teacher to lead the AP course who enjoyed a close rapport with the high school Spanish teacher, and who, despite the challenge of teaching the AP course in her first year of teaching, found the overall experience rich and rewarding. All of the district's first class of students received a passing score on the AP exam making them eligible for college credit at most colleges and universities. Parent involvement in the program at School 1 was high. A major strategy used to reach out to parents was

inviting them to parent meetings of the Future Hispanic Leaders of American chapter at the district high school.

School 2, located in an affluent suburb of a major urban area, serves a high percentage of Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students with a high mobility rate. The school started with a strong Spanish program and a large pool of eligible students, but it experienced difficulty with teacher motivation and parent involvement. The program benefited, however, from an extremely involved and dedicated program team comprised of a campus counselor and assistant principal with interest and support from the campus principal. All participating students in the first year of the program at School 2 scored a 3, 4, or 5 on the AP Spanish Language exam. A major benefit reported by program staff was the improved English skills of recent immigrant students who participated in the program.

Despite having an inexperienced teacher with a district-level permit, students in School 3's program performed well on the AP Spanish Language examination with all but one student scoring 3 or better on the exam. The school's program benefited from the experience of another campus in the district that had implemented the program previously, from district-wide commitment and administrative support for the program, and from strong parental involvement.

Findings

Despite the differences between the case study campuses, there were a few findings that bridged all implementation efforts.

- Teacher experience does not seem to be a precondition for program success.
- Program staff often sought input from other academic staff in determining credit policy for the course.
- Program staff supported regular meetings between middle and high school teachers as a primary strategy for curriculum alignment.
- A strong Spanish curriculum and/or tradition of offering AP Spanish in the district did not appear to be pre-conditions for program success. Rather, an expanded and aligned Spanish program at both the middle and high school levels resulted from participation in the AP Spanish Language program at the middle school.
- Increased interest in the Spanish program at both levels was also a consistent outcome at all the sites.
- The course requires a great deal of time and dedication from both students and teachers, and burnout is a potential challenge.
- A strong program team and the enthusiastic involvement of administrators in program implementation can overcome challenges, such as teacher inexperience or a lack of resources at the campus or district level.
- Case study campuses planned to continue and expand their programs with significant interest in the program from other middle schools in their districts.

Findings in terms of key areas of implementation are as follows.

Teacher selection. Some case study schools reported that they had difficulty finding Spanish teachers in general and had to assign teachers with little to no teaching experience to teach the challenging AP course. It does not appear, however, that teacher inexperience inhibited program success.

Student identification, recruitment, and selection. Campuses used myriad approaches in the identification and selection of students for enrollment in the AP course. These methods included home language surveys, student interest, proficiency tests, teacher input, and state test scores. While one district recruited students at an assembly of 200 Spanish-speaking students, another campus that served a relatively small Spanish-speaking student population conducted one-on-one interviews and counseling with prospective students. Some sites used the student identification process to also identify sixth and seventh graders for Pre-AP courses offered at the campus.

Policy development. At one site, campus policy related to the awarding of high school credit for a middle school course was determined at a meeting between the principals of the middle and high school. Another school used existing policy about AP credits and GPA where appropriate. Another sought recommendations from a range of other school staff to create official policy relating to credit for the course. In most cases, recommendations were subsequently sent to district committees and school boards for review and final approval.

Curriculum alignment. A strong Spanish curriculum and/or a tradition of offering AP Spanish were not pre-conditions for program success. In fact, an expanded and aligned Spanish program at both the middle and high school levels seemed to be a consistent outcome of implementing the program at the middle school. For example, case study sites that previously had limited Spanish offering are now offering a full sequence of courses for both native and non-native speakers.

To accomplish curriculum alignment, regular meetings and extended cooperation between middle and high school teachers was the common strategy. Teachers also seemed to benefit from the teacher-to-teacher support.

Parental involvement. Sites experienced a range of parent involvement in implementation from “standing room only” at program meetings to less participation than was expected or desired. Staff at all the campuses felt that parents, many of whom are new to the country or who have had limited educational opportunities themselves, support or approve of the program because they want success for their children. Strategies for initiating parental involvement included invitations to events conducted in Spanish, course-related festivities, college awareness sessions, and inclusion as chaperones on class field trips.

Supplemental activities. Common activities offered to complement the course included field trips (which seemed very important to students) and community service activities such as tutoring for community members who were learning English or Spanish. Formal

after-school tutoring and Saturday sessions to complete work from both the AP course and students' other classes were also a common program feature.

Challenges and benefits. Participants often cited the amount of work required of both teachers and students to teach and take the course as a common challenge. "I studied every night like they did," said one beginning teacher assigned to teach the course in her first year of teaching. Due to the rigor of the course, student motivation and burnout were common. Understanding the AP exam administration process was another oft-cited issue.

Chief among the reported benefits at the case study sites were the credit provided by the course; the incentive for students to take more advanced courses; the expanded Spanish curriculum and broadened interest in the Spanish program; the transfer of skills learned in the AP Spanish course to English, especially for recent immigrants; and increased self-confidence, interest in academic performance, and enhanced "status" of participating students among their peers.