



Creating & Sustaining a Culture of School Improvement

How Somerset Independent School District Built a System to Support Every Teacher & School Leader

Spring 2019

Summary

Located in rural Texas, southwest of San Antonio, Somerset Independent School District (ISD) struggled for years to meet student academic achievement goals and was identified as “academically unacceptable” and “improvement required” under various state accountability systems.

The inability to meet student learning goals undermined community support and pride in the school system, and contributed to a growing inability to recruit and retain effective teachers and principals. Teachers did not want to teach classes with the highest numbers of struggling students, and achievement gaps persisted for English learners, special education, and high-poverty students.

Beginning in 2010, Somerset piloted a new approach, focused on supporting improvements in teacher classroom instruction. The new approach started at the middle school, which had been rated “academically unacceptable” under the accountability system then in use in Texas. Early success with this approach led the district to extend it to the high school — which was also rated “unacceptable” — and then to roll it out districtwide.

Under the new approach, all six campuses met state standards in 2014 for the first time since 2011, even as the Texas Education Agency continued to raise accountability expectations. Somerset has sustained and increased its academic gains, with every school meeting standards again in 2018.

District Context & Challenges

Somerset ISD is located 15 miles southwest of downtown San Antonio and serves 3,956 students enrolled in six campuses from age 3 pre-K students in Head Start through 12th grade. 86% of students are Hispanic, 83% are economically disadvantaged and 59% are considered at-risk.

53% of Somerset’s teachers have five years or less experience in the classroom and most travel across several wealthier districts in San Antonio to reach Somerset, which has traditionally presented a significant challenge in retaining teachers.

Schools in Somerset failed to meet expectations on the state performance index for multiple years. The challenges to turning this around were many, including:

- ❖ A lack of community and family engagement;
- ❖ Inconsistent quality of classroom instruction;
- ❖ High turnover of teachers and principals; and
- ❖ An inability to effectively compete for talent with well-funded neighboring districts.

The district also struggled with equitable distribution of effective classroom teachers. As Superintendent Dr. Saul Hinojosa explained, “In the past, teachers in my district did not want to teach the classes with the highest numbers of struggling students.”

Classroom walkthroughs by administrators found teachers were not delivering high quality instruction aligned to the expectations of new more rigorous state standards. Teachers were struggling to differentiate instruction to challenge all levels of learners in their classroom.

Difficulties recruiting bilingual teachers made it hard to meet the needs of Somerset's large and growing population of English learners (ELs).

Efforts to improve classroom practice were also stymied by an ineffective evaluation and support system that many educators dismissed as weak and outdated. Superintendent Hinojosa commented, "It certainly wasn't working for us."

"We had to try something new, and we wanted to find an approach that our teachers and principals could strongly embrace."

- Saul Hinojosa, Superintendent

High levels of turnover among principals further contributed to an inability to make sustained improvements at the most challenged campuses.

Principal Tracy Padilla of Somerset Elementary described the situation: "Students were coming to us with an increasing number of challenges in their daily lives, including homelessness, transitory living situations during the school year, and parents with medical issues including mental illness or drug addiction. At the same time, the standards for what students needed to know and be able to do were being raised by the state."

Successful School Improvement

What worked for Somerset was a system focused on support for effective classroom teaching and increased student academic achievement growth for the highest-need students.

This approach was put in place for teachers of all students, and included:

1. New teacher leadership roles, as part of the school leadership team;
2. School-based professional learning delivered by teacher leaders;
3. Support for principals to create distributed leadership teams; and
4. Strengthening the teacher pipeline to ensure that new teachers have the knowledge and skills to be effective on day one.



I. New Instructionally Focused Teacher Leadership Roles

Somerset partnered with the National Institute for Excellence in Teaching (NIET) to create a support system that engaged teacher leaders to raise instructional excellence across the faculty. Teacher leaders in each school formed a Leadership Team with administrators responsible for setting school goals, providing job-embedded professional development and conducting multiple observations of each teacher with detailed feedback for improvement.

II. School-Based Professional Learning & Classroom Coaching By Teacher Leaders

This system creates a more cohesive and coherent approach to professional growth and development based on the needs of students and the specific instructional needs of their teachers.

Perhaps the most important aspect is how teachers lead the effort to redefine instructional excellence at a higher level and to embed these higher standards in school culture, conversations and practices.

Two teacher leadership positions were created: full release “master” teachers and “mentor” teacher positions with 3-5 hours of release time each week. The district put in place one master teacher for every 15-20 classroom teachers, and one mentor teacher for every six to eight classroom teachers.

Teachers were required to apply for these positions, demonstrating effective instruction and an ability to coach and support other adults. Professional learning and ongoing coaching takes place during the school day, so that professional growth is a part of everyone’s job.



III. Principal Leadership & Distributed Leadership Teams

A key part of the approach in Somerset is training and support for principals to develop and lead distributed leadership teams that:

1. Analyze data;
2. Set school goals and creating plans to meet goals;
3. Identify and field-test research based strategies;
4. Support teachers in classrooms to make measurable progress; and
5. Evaluate instruction and measure whether goals have been met.

Principals report that this approach results in more effective teaching in their schools. Additionally, Somerset teachers of all experience levels credit this teacher-centered approach for supporting student academic gains.

IV. Strengthening the Teacher Pipeline

Through a partnership with Texas Tech University (TTU) and NIET, the district created a “grow your own” program with community colleges in the Somerset area to identify and develop local teachers.

Students with an associate’s degree can participate in the 12-calendar month-long program to earn their teacher certification through TTU while student teaching in Somerset.

TTU offers support via an on-site coordinator, and teacher candidates are embedded in schools where they participate in observations and learn to meet high expectations for classroom instruction. Their coursework is delivered by TTU faculty at their school site. Among the first cohort, all but one were hired by the district.

Somerset benefits by developing local teachers who have ties to the community; an added bonus is that district staff knows the effectiveness of each teacher candidate before hiring, and teacher candidates are experienced and confident of their ability to meet the needs of students in that school.

“Teacher candidates know about teaching, how to plan a lesson, how to assess student learning and can manage student behavior. Our teacher candidates come out more like a second-year than first-year teacher.”

- D. Gale Stocks, Site Coordinator, Texas Tech's TechTeach Program

Student Academic Achievement Growth

These improvements led to dramatic gains in student academic achievement, particularly for students with the greatest learning gaps, including economically disadvantaged students and students with limited English proficiency.

In 2018, these gains continued, with 80% of economically disadvantaged 5th grade students passing standards in math and

77% of economically disadvantaged 8th grade students passing standards in reading.

Limited English Proficiency (LEP) students raised their performance in math to 83% of 5th grade students passing standards. In reading, LEP 8th grade students raised their performance to 61% passing standards.

By building a system that supports every teacher and school leader to continue to learn and improve, Somerset is better supporting students to excel.

