Preparing to Dream

College Access and Success for All of Houston’s Students          www.preparingtodream.org

A College Access and Success Initiative Uniting Five Houston-Area School Districts

National College Access Network (NCAN) and Houston A+ Challenge (Houston A+)
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Preparing to Dream (PTD)—a 4-year initiative (2007-2011) generously funded by the Houston Endowment—created a college-going culture in five Houston-area school districts in Texas’s Education Service Center (ESC) Region 4. National College Access Network (NCAN) and Houston A+ Challenge (Houston A+) partnered with Aldine ISD, Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, Goose Creek CISD, Wheatley HS in Houston ISD, and Spring Branch ISD to transform both their campus/district priorities and the implementation/decision making processes they used to promote a college-going culture in each of their respective communities.

PTD activities were aimed at achieving clear and simple student outcomes (see Figure 1). The initiative set out to increase the percentage of students who would:

- Successfully complete the college preparatory curriculum
- Take and complete accelerated learning courses (dual credit, advanced placement)
- Attain scores on college entrance assessments expected by Achieving the Dream colleges
- Complete the FAFSA on time and develop concrete plans to enroll in and pay for college
- Qualify, while in high school, to take credit-bearing courses in college by passing rigorous high school courses, especially in English and Mathematics
- Enroll in Achieving the Dream colleges and other postsecondary institutions

Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Impact</th>
<th>➤ YES</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Does it work?</td>
<td>Improved K-12 Student Outcomes – Current and Future?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Can it stick?</td>
<td>Successful and Sustainable Coordinated Strategies?</td>
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<tr>
<td>Does it meet the need?</td>
<td>Responsive to Community Need and State Mandates?</td>
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Cover Photo: Aldine ISD Dream Team Student Peer Mentors
The project, modeled on *Achieving the Dream*, evolved in two phases – Planning and Implementation. In November 2007, **planning** grants of $25,000 each were awarded to the districts, which were required to organize a **core team** and a **data team** to review outcome indicators and best practices. **NCAN** and **Houston A+** provided core team coaches and data facilitators to guide the work of these teams. The school districts were encouraged to select **best practices** that would most effectively enhance college readiness and access for their particular student populations.

Successful school districts who met the high expectations of the initiative, provided strong letters of commitment, and presented carefully designed projects to promote enrollment of a high percentage of their students in the *Achieving the Dream* colleges were awarded the **implementation** grant of $75,000 per year for three years. Additional funds provided professional development opportunities at two PTD institutes (fall and spring) in each year of the grant. As prescribed in the original grant, districts were given the opportunity to review their first year of implementation and submit revised proposals for adjustments/modifications for the subsequent two years of implementation.

**How Did They Do?**

Positive outcomes from PTD were many and varied across the participating districts. All found value in sharing things that did not work and resulted in changes and adjustments, as well as things that did work. Anecdotal information has been valuable as well as qualitative information. Some highlights are presented in Figure 2. These provide context, focus, some results, and substantial hope for the future. Individual participants and entire districts are likely forever changed—for the better.

Each district responded to its unique community needs. While all participating districts built a college-going culture, each did so in a manner that met the expectations of the community it serves. Districts were mindful of their demographics, district and community capacity, and finances. The project encouraged differentiation—no two districts engaged in an identical approach, although some districts had similar components. A ‘mix and match’ approach that used best practice and relied on data-based decision making **within the community** context was key to quality outcomes in the five districts.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Context Changes and Activity and Outcome Highlights</th>
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</table>
| Aldine ISD                   | - **Context**: 32% increase in number of graduates over the project period.  
- **Context**: 12% increases in number of students identified as LEP.  
- **Activity**: Focused effort on AP and dual credit at 2 of 5 high school campuses, resulting in a 56% increase district-wide.  
- **Activity and Outcome**: Personalized support to parents and students for college success and funding result in improved performance on college readiness measures – ranging from 3 – 95%.  
- **Outcome**: Efforts replicated in other campuses throughout the district.                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Cypress-Fairbanks ISD        | - **Context**: 37% increase in number of graduates over the project period.  
- **Context**: 36% increase in number of students classified as low SES; 10% increase in number of students classified as LEP.  
- **Activity and Outcome**: Focused effort on college and career readiness at one campus and improved performance across all indicators for the district.  
- **Outcome**: Efforts being replicated in other campuses throughout the district.                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Goose Creek ISD              | - **Context**: 33% increase in graduates over the project period.  
- **Context**: 10% increase in number of students classified as low SES.  
- **Activity and Outcome**: Focused efforts on community support and College Week for the district relate to improved performance in all college-ready, TSI, and AP/Dual credit indicators.  
- **Outcome**: Efforts recognized by the school board and became part of board’s vision – K-12 Initiative.                                                                                                                                                                                             |
| Wheatley High School (Houston ISD) | - **Context and Outcome**: 82% increase in graduates over the project period. (128 graduates in 2006 and 235 in 2010 from senior classes of about the same size.)  
- **Activity and Outcome**: Focused efforts on mathematics and coordination of services to students resulted in substantial gains in most college readiness measures – especially mathematics.  
- **Outcome**: AP/dual credit completion increased by 20%+  
- **Outcome**: Gains in scholarship funding obtained by graduates.  
- **Outcome**: Campus focus on use of data has become embedded.                                                                                                                                                                                                 |
| Spring Branch ISD            | - **Context**: 6% increase in number of graduates over the project period (Spring Branch is a landlocked, relatively low growth district).  
- **Context**: 9% increase in number of students identified as LEP.  
- **Activity and Outcome**: Focused effort on AP and dual credit at two of four comprehensive HS campuses resulted in a 14% increase district-wide.  
- **Activity and Outcome**: Began Early College Program with one community college that expanded to add one private 4-year and two public institutions.  
- **Activity and Outcome**: Innovative use of the COMPASS test in High School provides diagnostics that support differentiated teaching.  
- **Outcome**: College Access for ALL is the Superintendent’s and School Board’s #1 goal. |
There were common threads in campus and district activities that underpinned the results. The outline shown in Figure 3 showcases these threads that contributed to building an intervention roadmap for the future success of Houston’s students. Priorities, focus, teams, evidence, and a common will to transform the current ‘business as usual’ were essential to success. Every participating district engaged in these cornerstone components of the project.

Results of the project represent both procedural changes and quantitative changes. Selected outcome data available during the 2010-2011 school year are shown in Figures 4 – 7. Lags in availability of data on passing rates and college enrollment prevent the project from demonstrating its full impact—the future will provide those results.

Spring Branch ISD FAFSA Completion Night
Activities and Objectives Common to ALL Districts

Common threads linked their *activities*:

- **Vertical teams**
  - Changes occurred at all levels within the districts – post-secondary focus of PTD had impact on the actions and decisions of administrators, counselors, teaching staff, parents, and students.

- **Data and evidence-based/emerging best practices**
  - PTD project design and implementation decisions were informed by evidence throughout the three-year initiative.

- **Core teams**
  - Core implementation teams were supported by an *education coach* and core data teams had access to a national expert in data use – a *data facilitator*.

- **National support and sharing**
  - JBL Associates was hired to collect data and support the analysis of overall outcomes of the initiative.
  - Preparing to Dream data and core (planning) teams were modeled on those of the national Achieving the Dream (ATD) initiative.
  - District participants along with coaches and data facilitators shared results of the Preparing to Dream initiative at conferences throughout the United States.

- **Goal-directed and structured meeting formats**
  - NCAN and A+ supported districts to ‘stay on track’ and provided a standardized system for meeting content and review procedures.
  - NCAN and A+ convened bi-monthly debriefing meetings with the education coach and the data facilitators which enabled and encouraged cross-district support and collaborative problem solving.

- **Fall and Spring Resource Institutes**
  - All districts sent members of their core, data, and vertical teams to resource institutes. National experts on a variety of college access and success strategies were invited to speak. Speakers were based on the needs expressed by the teams. Spring Institutes were later used for sharing the successes and promising practices of participating districts.

Common threads linked their *objectives*:

- **Transforming policies and priorities** in the districts related to how each functioned:
  - Across schools at the same level;
  - Across schools at different levels; and,
  - To prepare and assist its students to transition to postsecondary education.

- **Promoting a college-going culture**
  - For each student in the district’s schools and community.
  - Engaging faculty and staff in the culture building activities.
As we review quantitative changes in performance over time, it is essential to discuss changes in demographics over the same period of time – were the districts serving the same demographic in 2006 and 2010? The answer in this case would be ‘No’. District demographics (see Figure 5) show that four of the five districts increased the proportion of students classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) over the period. Additionally, all districts include a higher proportion of students reported as Low Socio-Economic Status (SES) in 2010 when compared with 2006. These two findings are important to note. College readiness continues to be a greater challenge for areas with higher poverty and higher LEP levels.

As we review quantitative changes in performance over time, it is essential to discuss changes in demographics over the same period of time – were the districts serving the same demographic in 2006 and 2010? The answer in this case would be ‘No’. District demographics (see Figure 5) show that four of the five districts increased the proportion of students classified as Limited English Proficient (LEP) over the period. Additionally, all districts include a higher proportion of students reported as Low Socio-Economic Status (SES) in 2010 when compared with 2006. These two findings are important to note. College readiness continues to be a greater challenge for areas with higher poverty and higher LEP levels.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographics</th>
<th>State of Texas</th>
<th>Region 4 Texas</th>
<th>Aldine</th>
<th>Cypress-Fairbanks</th>
<th>Goose Creek</th>
<th>Spring Branch</th>
<th>Houston Wheatley</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Low SES</td>
<td>6.7%</td>
<td>4.1%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LEP</td>
<td>5.6%</td>
<td>10.3%</td>
<td>12.0%</td>
<td>10.0%</td>
<td>-4.9%</td>
<td>9.2%</td>
<td>5.4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Goose Creek numbers are 2007-2010
Additionally, changes in the overall size of the districts were noted for four of the five districts. Anywhere from 6% to 37% growth in the size of district graduating classes were noted between 2006 and 2010 (Wheatley High School experienced even greater growth). The numbers outlined in Figure 6 provide some idea of the magnitude of the growth. The positive changes over time in the various readiness indicators are more important given the demographic shifts that posed greater challenges for the five districts and the substantial increases in growth that most experienced.

### Figure 6

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District</th>
<th>Aldine</th>
<th>Cypress-Fairbanks</th>
<th>Goose Creek*</th>
<th>Spring Branch</th>
<th>Wheatley HS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2006 Graduation Count</td>
<td>2111</td>
<td>4834</td>
<td>880</td>
<td>1749</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2010 Graduation Count</td>
<td>2787</td>
<td>6638</td>
<td>1167</td>
<td>1853</td>
<td>233</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Net Change 2006-2010</td>
<td>676</td>
<td>1804</td>
<td>287</td>
<td>104</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Change 2006-2010</td>
<td>32%</td>
<td>37%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>82%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% Change District Enrollment 2006-2010</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>21%</td>
<td>4%</td>
<td>-1%</td>
<td>18% (WHS)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Changes in quantitative outcomes over time (2006-2010) are compared in Figure 7 with changes in the State of Texas, in Region 4 Texas (53 school districts in Texas constitute the Region – the five districts in the project are included in that number), and by district. There are a few caveats in the review of these data that must be addressed. Since the five districts that participated in the project provided outcomes that are included in both the Texas and the Region 4 data, any improvements in the five districts also improved the state and regional data. It is also important to note that a change measure is influenced by initial status - when district outcomes are high initially there cannot be much percentage change over time due to a ceiling effect. Potential ceiling effects were present for Cypress-Fairbanks and Spring Branch school districts.

Quantitative outcomes are highlighted when change in an indicator was greater for a district than it was for the State of Texas and/or Region 4. The five districts out-performed the State and/or Region in 17 of the 40 outcomes. This snapshot helps to illustrate the positive impact the project delivered overall.

Specific impact information for individual districts is provided later (see Figures 8 and 9). However, this overview supports the notion that focused attention by a campus or district on the areas in need of support, the use of evidence-based best practices, and funds that provide the professional development, data analysis, and material support can be successful in changing the culture of an organization. Significant changes in some of the outcomes are due to the individualized plans for each district and represent the impact of focused efforts. Coordinated efforts that support incremental and meaningful adjustments over time and that meet the needs of the students involved have been successful.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>Quantitative Change from 2006-2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>State of Texas</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Success Measures</td>
<td>37.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Ready English Language Arts</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Ready Math</td>
<td>48.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College Ready Both</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSI-ELA</td>
<td>24.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TSI-Math</td>
<td>27.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SAT/ACT =/+ Criterion</td>
<td>-0.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AP/DC completion</td>
<td>25.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
High school outcomes and college readiness measures help to predict college-going. National Student Clearinghouse (NSC) data link high school graduation to college enrollment. The 2006-2010 NSC data are available for 3 of the 5 districts (the 2007-2010 data are available for a 4th district) and show the proportion of high school graduates who entered college the Fall immediately after high school graduation in Figure 8. Results for 2006 demonstrate that 27-64% of the graduates entered college the subsequent Fall; for 2010, results range from 56-65% of the graduates. The proportions improve for each of the four districts when a wider time-frame is permitted. Specifically, when the measure extends to the 1st year after high school graduation, ranges from 30-68% in 2006 and 52-70% in 2010 are reported. While access to college is important, success in college is paramount. Initial success involves students returning to college (retention) – students who returned to college for a 2nd (or, perhaps, a sophomore) year range from 77-93% in 2006 to 83-91% in 2009 across the four districts. These data are confined to enrollment and retention – type of course (developmental or creditbearing), credits earned, and any grades related to those credits are not available for this analysis. We anticipate that increased college matriculation and retention rates will be seen in subsequent years as the impact of the culture changes realizes its full effect.

**Figure 8**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Outcomes</th>
<th>College Enrollment 2006-2010</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>National Student Clearinghouse (NSC)</td>
<td>Aldine</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in College – Fall after High School graduation 2006-2010</td>
<td>43% - 47%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled in College – 1st Year after High School graduation 2006-2010</td>
<td>49% - 52%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enrolled - 1st Year who returned 2006-2009</td>
<td>80% - 83%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Goose Creek numbers are 2007-2010; all data are district wide.*
While some of the outcomes may, at first glance, seem discouraging, it is essential to consider the data within the context of the challenges these districts faced. The Houston metropolitan area has experienced continued and substantial growth over the last five years. Nowhere is this growth more noticeable than in its school systems. Most districts have experienced increased numbers of students, numbers for whom English is a second language, who experience poverty, and who may not have a support structure that meets their needs. Given these challenges, activities that show direct impact on college readiness measures, completion rates, AP and dual credit enrollment, and the various college entrance tests and Texas Success Initiative Indicators are worthy of further review and investigation.

A key element of Preparing to Dream was the opportunity for differentiation among the districts. While all districts worked toward the same overall objectives, the structure of the project recognized that participating districts began with different baselines and different challenges. District activities were responsive to the needs of their community and results were reviewed periodically to determine if a change in course was necessary. Specific activities by district are shown in Figure 9.
The Implementation/Decision Making Process

There were three key processes used in the successful implementation of the Preparing to Dream initiative. The synergistic nature of these suggests that omitting any one of them would have resulted in diminished outcomes. The key processes are grant design elements, strong leadership, and strategic data-driven decision making. Each of these processes is reviewed below in more detail.

The grant design elements included a grant commitment that was for a longer term than typical for most of the school districts. The fact that the grant included a planning phase, in which teams were assembled, data reviewed, decision-making informed and commitment shared, was a luxury seldom experienced by the school districts. Each district also understood that the six outcomes outlined in the original proposal guided but did not limit district plans. Each district was encouraged to design grant activities around district needs with connections to some, but not all, of the larger grant outcomes.

The grant design elements also include structured flexibility. At the end of each year, team reflections led districts to modify plans to better serve the needs of their students. If something wasn’t working, then the freedom to change was not only possible but encouraged; if another district had success with a specific program or activity, districts were further encouraged to adopt and adapt these into ongoing plans.

The design of each district plan also encouraged consideration of other grants, programs and activities being contemporaneously implemented in the participating districts. The ability to focus the efforts of the grant on a high need target group of students, a single feeder pattern or even a new high school was an element that districts appreciated and valued.
### Figure 9

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>District/School</th>
<th>PTD Primary Focus Areas</th>
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| Aldine ISD                  | • Provide more information and one-on-one assistance to parents and students regarding the college application process (including college applications and financial aid/scholarship applications and college entrance exams).  
• Use peer mentors, or the Dream Team, to motivate and assist students with the college application and financial aid and to educate younger elementary students about postsecondary education.  
• Create a college-going culture.  
• Encourage higher rates of completing dual and AP credits.  
• Focus on two comprehensive high schools |
| Cypress-Fairbanks ISD       | • Provide more information and resources on postsecondary education and careers.  
• Improve data collection and evaluation efforts of district’s college access programs.  
• Establish a collaborative partnership with Long Star College – Cy-Fair.  
• Create a college-going culture.  
• Focus on one comprehensive high school feeder pattern with matched control school |
| Goose Creek ISD             | • Increase college and financial aid awareness by providing more information and resources in addition to implementing new curricula and a public education campaign.  
• Institute a College Week across the district.  
• Create a college-going culture.  
• Work with the local community college, Lee College, to strengthen dual enrollment and educate students and parents on college and financial aid.  
• District-wide focus |
| Houston ISD - Wheatley High School | • Improve methods of surveying and tracking the District’s graduates.  
• Improve college readiness by improving the mathematics program.  
• Increase the rigor and quality of instruction in math classrooms.  
• Increase the provision of student supports in math through afterschool tutoring and summer courses.  
• Increase student enrollment and successful completion of four years of mathematics (Algebra I, Geometry, Algebra II followed by Statistics, Pre-Calculus, Calculus and AP Dual Credit math courses).  
• Create a college-going culture through academic preparedness in mathematics and thus increasing the number of graduating students enrolling in a two or four year college and/or technical school. |
| Spring Branch ISD           | • Partner with local higher education institutions to create an early college program to provide students awareness of and experience in post-secondary life.  
• Improve methods of surveying and tracking the District’s graduates. |

Additional information on each of the districts’ initiatives can be found at: [http://houstonaplus.org/preparingtodream](http://houstonaplus.org/preparingtodream) and [http://houstonaplus.org/preparingtodream/results](http://houstonaplus.org/preparingtodream/results)
Grant design focused on sustainability. Alignment with other initiatives and a relentless focus on what was working and how to incorporate it into the business of the district supported that focus. Finally, a key component of the grant that lead to sustainability was the declining grant support for personnel during each year of the grant. This made it much less difficult for districts to pick up funding, especially in light of the significant changes that were documented in final reports.

Another key process was the multifaceted nature of strong leadership in all areas of the grant. The commitment of combined leadership of each school district, the regional partner – Houston A+ Challenge, and the national partner – National College Access Network, cannot be overstated. Each served a vital role in supporting the district teams’ vision for the work with sustainability imbedded in the forefront of the process. Leadership at both the upper-levels of a district/school administration and the project-team level was seen as crucial to this work. At the district and school levels, this was more about championing the project to ensure (a) support and active, skilled participation by both team members and individuals outside of the project team and (b) district and partner resources brought into the project.

By and large, the PTD teams found great value not only in the financial support from the project partners and its flexibility, but also their knowledge and expertise. Through the initiative, successful PTD teams turned to the project partners for guidance and support, whether to assist in relationships between the teams and coaches/facilitators or to help the teams navigate the financial systems and bureaucracy of their district. The PTD sites used the partners as a supportive resource to their projects.

At the project team level, leadership was crucial to coordinating and implementing the work. For Project Team Leaders, it was beneficial to have influence within the district to navigate the system as well as to motivate others. It was easier to move the PTD initiative forward with a committed group of individuals working together on the project. District efforts that utilized only one or two people placed a large burden on the individuals. In contrast, those that involved and utilized a larger group benefited from a greater spread of the workload, deeper reach into the district/schools, and perhaps deeper strategic conversations about the PTD project. The composition of the teams seemed critical to the success of each district. Some districts did have leadership changes at the district and team levels, but the support of those who remained led to a seamless transition.

The partner organizations performed another essential leadership role. NCAN provided access to nationally known experts in the field of college access and success. They invited and supported team member participation in an annual conference where exposure to noteworthy college access programs was motivating and transformative. These resources were instrumental in shaping district plans in subsequent years as each team become more informed about the programs and services available to creating or strengthening a college-going culture on their campus. Some of these same team members became presenters themselves at national conferences sharing the successes of the grant.
NCAN identified and secured the services of outside data facilitators for each of the districts. The data facilitators were instrumental in keeping the school districts focused on data-driven decision making and asking the tougher questions highlighted by the data. NCAN helped to secure additional grants that supported parental initiatives for the participating districts. Two grants from TG Public Benefit Grant were tremendously helpful in gathering input and providing relevant topical sessions for students and parents. These additional funds leveraged the teams’ impact on building a college-going culture in significant ways.

Houston A+ played a key leadership role by identifying the core team coaches, who were Houston-based educational professionals with experiential understanding of school districts, their policies, programs and services. The core coaches could speak from an insider’s perspective and balance the data facilitators’ viewpoint. For some teams, the regularity of their team meetings and the purpose of these meetings created dialogue among team members and provided an opportunity for reflection. This resulted in new ideas and refinements to the grant which facilitated its documented success.

Houston A+ provided meeting support for the data facilitator and core coach team debriefing sessions. The Coaches and Data Facilitators’ Debriefing sessions have been described as “professional sharing at its best.” These sessions allowed the coaches and facilitators to debrief on the progress and challenges that their districts faced while soliciting the feedback of their colleagues. The coaches and facilitators found value in these sessions and were able to strategize and take the groups’ thoughtful suggestions back to their respective districts. This process piece added significant value to the initiative as a whole and made the work consistent and impactful across the entire initiative.

NCAN and Houston A+ collaborated to present the fall and spring institutes, which were powerful learning opportunities for the district teams. The institutes provided meaningful resources that benefited all districts. The two partners also helped structure the initiative to require compliance and accountability from the districts. The momentum from the first year of the grant propelled the subsequent years of successes and accomplishments. Towards the end of the grant, the Spring Institute allowed the districts to reflect upon their work, review their evaluation process, celebrate their success, share promising new practices, and plan for the next year. This was also an opportunity for new members of the teams to become fully engaged in the work and the purpose of the project.

All of the previous process discussion would have been meaningless without the information essential to strategic data-driven decision making. This point is last but clearly not the least, as a focus on data helped the district teams concentrate on measurable results throughout the entire grant. The planning phase reviewed contemporary data from the Gulf Coast Region, Texas and nationally with an emphasis on the growing low-income and limited English proficiency students in each of the school districts. The district data mirrored those same trends and helped each district refine and direct their limited grant resources for the greatest impact.
The biggest challenge of the data was to determine how the districts could measure the impact of the original grant outcomes through the use of approximate measures to guide progress throughout the grant. In most cases, the districts did not lack data, but needed help and guidance in looking at important data elements to measure the impact of the PTD initiative. The primary goal was to use data to keep the initiative on track. Districts also needed to collect activity-level data to determine who was served and who needed more encouragement to utilize services or programs offered.

The most successful districts had sufficient staff capacity to collect, analyze and interpret data on a regular basis. This allowed them to track their outcomes and adapt their strategies in accordance with the data and aligned with the larger goals of the Preparing to Dream initiative. Other districts, with the help of their data facilitators, core coaches and the leadership of NCAN and Houston A+ made great strides in their data capacity during the latter years of the grant.

For many of the teams, the Data Facilitator and/or Core Team Coach were seen as important conduits for their project, both in the planning stage and throughout the implementation phase. In particular, those teams that had a data-focus to their project and/or had good data capacity within the PTD team found their data facilitators to be very valuable. Likewise, the core team coaches who were connected to, and/or held influence in the district were seen as very beneficial to the project.
Conclusion

The Preparing to Dream grant was transformational for each of the districts. The initiative worked, it is being sustained, and it made a difference in meeting district needs. Providing expert support to identify needs in the planning phase set the stage for successful implementation. Asking the right questions clearly, finding the information to answer them and creating meaningful and measurable action plans propelled the districts forward. It was evident from the onset that culture change in a school district, while challenging, is very possible without a big investment. For all of the school districts, the grant funds were minimal compared to their overall budgets, but important in the scope of the project for the greater Houston area. Each district rose to that challenge and within three years gained considerable traction.

The PTD design was clearly focused on the individual districts with flexibility, accountability, and adjustments evident throughout. Additional funds were also available to districts to provide seed funding for what they wanted to do and even occasionally additional funds for what they should do for their students.

In addition to the ongoing accountability from regularly scheduled meetings and institutes, training opportunities and new resources added to the momentum throughout the implementation of the grant. The grant changed the conversation in the districts from “it’s my job to get them out of high school” to “it’s my job to get them ready and able to make the right choices”. There was a shift in culture for students between institutions as students who took dual credit courses on community college campuses began to see themselves of college material.

Many of the programs created in the PTD grant became district-wide—expanding from high school to elementary, going from a day-long activity to a week-long activity, spreading from a pilot high school to additional high schools. From a project management viewpoint, the Preparing to Dream districts have begun to conduct their business around the college access work with a broader, more inclusive approach. They should be forever aware of the culture change process that yields positive results. May others learn from these findings so that the impact continues.
The mission of the National College Access Network (NCAN) is to improve access to and success in postsecondary education for disadvantaged and underrepresented students and those who are the first generation in their families to attend college. NCAN does this by supporting a network of state and local college access programs that provide counseling, advice, and financial assistance; sharing best practices among the network; providing leadership and technical assistance; and helping establish new college access programs.

NCAN college access programs serve students and families in almost every state and the District of Columbia. NCAN member programs work in inner cities, rural communities and suburbs. Through hands-on advising and financial assistance, NCAN programs share a commitment to inspiring and motivating young men and women to obtain a college education and help them pay the tuition. For assistance in establishing a college access initiative in your community or state, please contact us.

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Houston A+ Challenge’s mission is to serve as a catalyst for change in the public schools that educate nine of every ten children in our region, teaming with principals and teachers in targeted schools to ensure that every student is prepared for post-secondary success. Houston A+ Challenge serves as a catalyst for change in the public schools that educate nine of every ten children in our region, teaming with principals and teachers in targeted schools to ensure that every student is prepared for post-secondary success.

We are committed to ensuring that all public school students, no matter what their background, graduate high school prepared to achieve their maximum potential for success in college, career and civic life. These students are educated by thousands of Houston A+–trained administrators and teachers in schools and classrooms throughout Houston, each provided with the training and tools necessary to ensure that these students achieve. Students, administrators, and teachers are supported by families that provide encouragement, and community leaders and benefactors who provide expertise and resources to make an excellent education possible for all students.

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