Aldine Independent School District, Texas

District Profile*

Rank among U.S. school districts (by size):	66
Number of schools:	72
Number of students:	60,083
Number of teachers:	4,011
Per pupil expenditures**:	$8,100

Superintendent: Wanda Bamberg became superintendent of Aldine Independent School District in June 2007. She has 32 years of experience in education, including 28 years in Aldine, where she has served as a teacher, director and as executive director of curriculum and instruction from 2001 through 2007, helping to make Aldine a four-time Broad Prize finalist.

Governance: Seven-member board of education elected at large to serve four-year terms.

Teachers Unions: Texas is a non-union state.

Student Characteristics

Percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price school lunch:	84.3 %
Percent of students designated as English language learners:	31 %

Student Demographics:

- African-American - 30%
- Asian - 2%
- Hispanic - 64%
- White - 4%
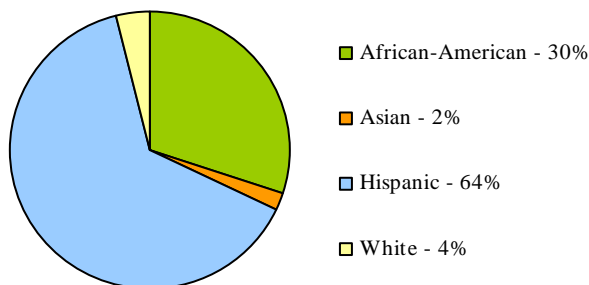
*Numbers reflect most recent data available at time of publication and may not tie to previously printed 2009 Broad Prize publications.
**Total expenditures per pupil in 2006-07. Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Student Achievement

In 2008:

- Aldine (AISD) **outperformed other districts in Texas that serve students with similar family incomes** in reading and math at all school levels (elementary, middle and high school), according to The Broad Prize methodology. Of the five finalists, Aldine ranked highest in terms of student performance that exceeded statistically predicted student performance based on family income levels.

- Aldine's Hispanic and low-income students **achieved higher average proficiency rates than their state counterparts** in reading and math at all school levels. In addition, Aldine's African-American students achieved higher average proficiency rates than their state counterparts in math at all school levels and in middle and high school reading. In fact, of the 18 metrics available to compare Aldine's Hispanic, low-income and African-American student proficiency rates with their state counterparts, Aldine students achieved higher average proficiency rates than their state counterparts in 17 cases.

- Similarly, a **greater percentage of Aldine's Hispanic and low-income students performed at the highest achievement level** on state reading and math assessments at all school levels than did their state counterparts.

- Aldine's math **achievement gaps between income groups at all school levels** (measured both for reaching proficiency on the state assessment, as well as reaching "above level") **were among the smallest in the state**. The same was true in elementary and high school reading. Aldine's income achievement gaps for students reaching "advanced level" in reading and math at all school levels were also the smallest in the state. In fact, Aldine demonstrated the smallest income achievement gaps relative to the state—regardless of the bar—of all five Broad Prize finalists.

- **Although family income level is a strong statistical predictor of school performance nationwide, in Aldine, where 80 percent of the students are considered low-income (the highest of the 2009 Broad Prize finalist districts), poverty does not appear to be statistically related to achievement at any school level or in math or reading.** Instead, high student achievement appears to be as likely in Aldine's low-income schools as in its non-low income schools. For example, more than 50 percent of Aldine's highest-poverty schools performed better than the district did on average on state reading and math tests at all levels. In this category of data analysis, Aldine had the highest performance of the five finalists.

Between 2005 and 2008:

- Despite the relatively small size of its achievement gaps between low- and non-low-income students, Aldine still made progress in closing them over time. Aldine **narrowed income achievement gaps in reading at all school levels and in elementary and middle school math**.

- Of the four Broad Prize finalist districts that have sizable African-American student populations, Aldine **narrowed the highest percentage of African-American achievement gaps** between 2005 and 2008.

- In the case of gaps between both African-American and Hispanic achievement compared with the state average for white students, Aldine narrowed these achievement gaps in reading at all levels and in elementary and middle school math. For example, during this time, the gap between the district's African-American students and the state average for white students narrowed by 14 percentage points in middle school math.

- Between 2005 and 2008, **SAT and Advanced Placement participation rates for African-American and Hispanic students in Aldine rose**. For example, SAT participation rates for Hispanic students increased by 11 percentage points over this period.

High Impact Factors Behind This Success

- **The district's comprehensive, fully integrated and aligned curricular and instructional system sets clear, rigorous expectations for teachers and principals and provides ready access to instructional resources and student achievement information.**

  Teachers and program directors from the district's office of curriculum and instruction have jointly created scope-and-sequence documents—in every subject area for every grade level—that map out what teachers across the district will teach in six-week cycles during the course of the school year. These documents define what state standards should be addressed and when, providing all staff with a consistent instructional timeline.

  With this timeline in hand, Aldine teachers are able to turn to TRIAND, the district's online curriculum and assessment database, to access model lessons that have been vetted by the district's curriculum and instruction division. Teachers are required to submit lesson plans to their principals on a weekly basis—electronically through TRIAND—using a standard lesson plan format that:
    1. holds them accountable for preparing quality lessons
    2. requires lessons be aligned to curriculum and
    3. ensures that content that needs to be re-taught is delivered in a manner that is likely to reach students, because the best supplemental materials are being used.

  TRIAND also requires school leaders to complete weekly reviews of every teacher's lesson plans, and the standardized format makes it easy for principals to do so in a timely, efficient fashion.

  As an example of how teachers use TRIAND to adjust their instruction, high school teachers in a particular subject access the system to hone in on commonly missed test questions. Working in teams, the teachers then reflect on their instruction and develop hypotheses about why students missed a given question. This reflective exercise, based on the reports available in TRIAND, may lead to modifications in instruction to make up for lapses in learning. With this structure, teachers report being able to focus their energies on higher-level analyses of barriers and solutions to student learning, rather than on simply tracking down information and resources or developing hypotheses from scratch.

  TRIAND is in part fed by data from frequent student assessments, which provide teachers, instructional leaders and district staff with valuable student achievement information that empowers them to monitor and modify instruction until students demonstrate that they have mastered a subject.

Aldine administers six-week common assessments in math, science and reading/language arts. These assessments are directly linked to the curriculum and provide a timely check on student learning in order to identify content that needs to be re-taught. Additionally, Aldine administers benchmark assessments twice a year in all grades in language arts, math, science and social studies. Teachers create the items on the benchmark assessments under the leadership of the district's curriculum program director, who ensures quality and consistency across schools.

Test results are available in the TRIAND system hours after assessments are administered, enabling teachers to review the results the same day. Teachers and school leaders can access student assessment data by teacher, grade level, student sub-group, school and district.

The district segments the curriculum into six-week blocks of content, which are then tested by the common assessments. The entire system is designed to ensure that educators meet these six-week curricular milestones. Common planning time, which is required of teachers at all grade levels, helps teachers ensure that students meet those milestones. During these meetings, teachers review the results of three- and six-week assessments to determine whether and how to adjust lesson plans to meet the needs of their students.

District staff also use the test data to identify students who need special help, such as special education or English language learner students, and they then use this information to implement targeted staff development in schools where problems were detected. Individual professional development plans are shaped by TRIAND data as well as by classroom walk-through data compiled by principals and other school leaders.

- **Aldine regularly monitors progress toward goals in its strategic plan to ensure that all staff remain focused on district-wide priorities and that all departments, schools and resources are focused on reaching these strategic goals.**

Under Aldine's strategic plan, the district has just three areas of focus: student achievement, student behavior and community relations. These simple priorities set the direction for the entire district. The board, superintendent and cabinet developed a key objective for each area of focus (for example, implement effective discipline management strategies to improve student behavior) with extensive community and school-level input.

Under each objective, district leaders have articulated a set of specific, measurable goals, complete with performance targets, one-year and three- to five-year milestones. The goals are further broken down into actions, tasks are linked to responsible individuals, and specific resources are assigned.

Each year, Aldine requires all of its schools to develop action plans that support the district's three priorities. Each quarter, the board and district leadership review action plans by school and feeder pattern to ensure that all efforts are aligned to district goals. Scorecards at the district, regional and school levels summarize progress on goals and hold school and district leaders accountable for achieving them. This quarterly cycle of reflection allows the district to move quickly to address emerging problems and echoes the district's belief that strategic planning should both set a long-term vision and drive short-term cycles of detailed planning, action and reflection.

District leaders regularly review and monitor progress toward strategic objectives, taking into account multiple types of data, including student achievement results, college entrance exam scores, college enrollment data, and student and staff demographic data.

Last year, for example, when the district fell just short of NCLB graduation targets, it triggered a far-reaching examination of traditional grading and credit awarding policies. "What are the barriers holding children back [from graduating]?" asks Superintendent Bamberg. "What is the purpose of a grade?" A superintendent-led probe prompted quick, resilient changes within schools, such as giving students more opportunities to make up coursework and setting up multiple ways students could recover credits.

- **The district gives its principals budget autonomy, so long as they align financial decisions with student achievement goals.**

  Schools receive a good deal of flexibility in how they allocate discretionary funds, so long as decisions are based on the school's improvement plan. Aldine's budgeting process includes school-level checks and balances that require principals to justify projected expenditures to the district's finance department, based on a school's needs assessment, and to evaluate the effectiveness of past spending decisions before they can recommit funds. A district budget director will deny a school's budget if it is not tightly aligned to its campus improvement plan.

  To help principals manage their budgets, the district created an Excel-based process called Automated Budget Coordination (ABC), which walks principals through their campus-based budgeting and provides guidelines on how funds can be spent. Principals are trained extensively on how to appropriately assess their school's needs, how to use data to evaluate the success of school efforts, and how to incorporate stakeholder input and program evaluations when making budget decisions.

At the school level, instructional leaders are required to complete evaluations documenting whether a program was an effective use of funds, based on that program's outcomes. The evaluations also require instructional leaders to identify any challenges encountered, list recommended changes going forward, and decide whether to maintain the program in the coming year.

Principals report that this system incentivizes them to invest their resources carefully and to identify cost savings. For example, when after-school tutoring resulted in stagnant test scores, one principal told the district he had decided to remove that program. In its place, he created a Saturday tutoring program, which resulted in improved student achievement.

Another principal reported his decision to reduce transportation offerings for Saturday school after parents started bringing their children on their own, instead redirecting funds to instructional programs. As a result, Aldine principals have budgetary discretion—which is often denied to school principals in most urban districts—to make important, school-based decisions regarding their own budgets. But Aldine's central office is still able to understand principals' rationale—and hold them accountable—for using resources toward strategic objectives.

District-wide budgeting decisions are similarly based on student outcomes. For example, the district decided to place science skills specialists in all intermediate (fifth- and sixth-grade) schools after noticing that science assessment results for these grades lagged other subjects and grade levels.

- **Aldine aggressively and thoughtfully recruits teachers and successfully targets high-quality candidates.**

  Aldine has established partnerships with 32 of the top teacher preparation institutions across the country. Some of these relationships date back more 20 years. In some cases, Aldine recruiters are in contact with promising future teacher recruits as early as their sophomore year of college. About 25 percent of Aldine's new hires result through these university partnerships.

  To help persuade potential recruits who are thinking of relocating to Aldine, the district's human relations department publishes and distributes a booklet with resources helpful to the relocation process, such as apartment listings, moving tips and comparative real estate information. Approximately half of new hires in Aldine come through job fairs.

  Aldine also covers tuition for bilingual paraprofessionals who are working toward earning a teaching certificate. From 2005 through 2008, 52 people took advantage of this district-subsidized tuition. The district also offers "contracts" to Aldine high school graduates who are interested in becoming teachers, which means that once an Aldine graduate earns their teaching degrees (often from those universities with which Aldine partners), they are guaranteed a job in the district. Many even bring their "contract" with them when they apply.

Principals have the autonomy to select their own staff. However, both Aldine principals and human resources department staff report that such a strong rapport and professional respect exists between the two groups that principals often accept the department's recommendations.

All new Aldine teachers participate in a three-day New Teacher Induction Academy, which orients them to the student and instructional strategies specific to Aldine. New teachers are further supported by a year-long induction academy and mentoring program that includes professional development specifically geared to the new teacher.

Aspiring principals are encouraged to participate in a leadership awareness academy that provides an overview of the necessary skills and knowledge to be a successful Aldine principal. Area superintendents also use their time on campuses to identify individuals who demonstrate the qualities of an Aldine leader, holding conferences with promising assistant principals and creating action plans to prepare those candidates for leadership positions. Because of the district's commitment to "growing our own" leaders, nearly all principals come from within the district.

Aldine's recruiting and promoting strategies have resulted in high retention rates—more than 90 percent for principals and more than 85 percent for teachers over the last five years.