Northside Independent School District

District Profile

Rank among U.S. School Districts (by size):	44
Number of Schools:	94
Number of Students:	81,881
Number of Teachers:	4,576
Annual Budget:	$1 billion

Superintendent: Dr. John M. Folks was appointed superintendent of the Northside Independent School District in July 2002. Prior to joining the district, he was superintendent of the Spring Independent District in Houston from 1997 to 2002. A native of Oklahoma, Folks previously was dean of the School of Education at Southwestern Oklahoma State University, superintendent of the Midwest City-Del City Public Schools in suburban Oklahoma City and Oklahoma State superintendent of public instruction.

Governance: Seven-member school board, elected by geographic region to serve four-year terms.

Teachers Unions: Texas is a non-union state.

Student Characteristics

Percent of Students Eligible for Free/Reduced-Price School Lunch:	46 %
Percent of Students Designated as English Language Learners:	7 %

Student Demographics

- Asian/Pacific Islander/Filipino
- African-American
- Hispanic
- White
- Other

1% 3% 8% 26% 62%
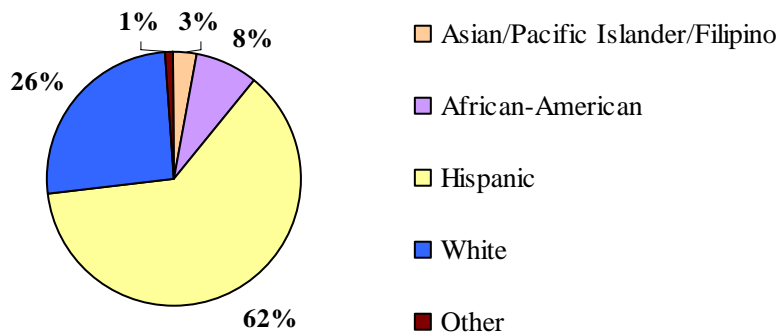
Student Achievement

Northside Independent School District's (NISD) student achievement gains are evidenced by publicly available data collected and analyzed by MPR Associates, Inc., a leading education research consulting firm. Among the reasons that NISD stood out among large urban school districts:

- **Greater overall performance.** In 2006, Northside *outperformed other districts in Texas serving students with similar income levels* in reading and math at all grade levels: elementary, middle and high school, according to The Broad Prize methodology.

- **Greater subgroup performance.**
  - In 2006, Northside's *African-American, Hispanic and low-income students outperformed their peers in similar Texas districts* in reading and math at all grade levels, according to The Broad Prize methodology.

  - In 2006, Northside's *African-American, Hispanic and low-income students achieved higher average proficiency rates than the statewide average for these subgroups* in reading and math at all levels.

- **Greater overall improvement.** Between 2003 and 2006, Northside *showed greater improvement than other Texas districts serving students with similar income levels* in reading and math in elementary and middle school and in high school reading, using The Broad Prize methodology.

- **Greater subgroup improvement.**
  - Between 2003 and 2006, Northside's *low-income students showed greater improvement than their peers in similar Texas districts* in reading and math in elementary and middle school and in high school reading, according to The Broad Prize methodology.

  - Between 2003 and 2006, Northside's *African-American students showed greater improvement than their peers in similar Texas districts* in elementary and middle school reading and math, according to The Broad Prize methodology.

  - Between 2003 and 2006, Northside's *Hispanic students showed greater improvement than their peers in similar Texas districts* in reading at all grade levels and in middle school math.

  - Between 2003 and 2006, *participation rates and scores for African-American and Hispanic students taking the SAT exam rose* in Northside.

  - During this same time period, *participation rates for African-American and Hispanic students taking Advanced Placement exams rose* in Northside.

- **Closing achievement gaps.**
  - Northside *narrowed achievement gaps between African-American and Hispanic students and their white peers in the district* in reading and math at all grade levels. Between 2003 and 2006, for example, the African-American-white achievement gap narrowed 9 percentage points in elementary school math.

  - Northside also *narrowed achievement gaps between low-income students and their non-low-income peers in the district* in elementary and middle school reading and math and in high school reading. Between 2003 and 2006, for example, the gap between low-income students and non-low-income students narrowed 9 percentage points in middle school reading and 10 percentage points in high school reading.

o Between 2003 and 2006, Northside also *narrowed achievement gaps between low-income students and the state average for non-low-income students* in reading at all grade levels and in elementary and middle school math. For example, Northside reduced this gap by 11 percentage points each in middle and high school reading and in middle school math.

Key District Policies and Practices

SchoolWorks, an education consulting firm based in Beverly, Mass., collected and analyzed evidence of Northside Independent School District**'s** (NISD) policies and practices affecting teaching and learning. This qualitative analysis included a site visit, hundreds of interviews and analysis of extensive documentation. The criteria for evaluation, available at www.broadprize.org/TBPSchoolWorksQualityCriteria.pdf, are grounded in research-based school and district practices found to be effective in three key areas: teaching and learning, district leadership and operations and support systems. NISD demonstrated the following effective policies and practices:

Teaching and Learning

Research shows that effective teaching is the primary factor contributing to high levels of student achievement. NISD promotes strong teaching and learning through clear curriculum documents and accompanying materials and programs, a research-based framework for instructional delivery, a comprehensive curriculum, a comprehensive district-developed assessment system and instructional leaders at all levels of the district.

Curriculum

NISD curriculum documents promote good teaching practices by making state standards very clear and by providing ample guidance about pacing and activities. Written curriculum and accompanying programs and materials are research-based, readily available and selected or designed by district personnel to meet specific student learning needs.

- Curriculum documentation, aligned to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), helps teachers know what to teach and when to teach it. Sets of standards are organized into nine-week instructional blocks. Nine-week scope and sequence documents indicate a recommended number of instructional days per standard and include learning objectives, detailed activities and resources that can be used to plan lessons.

- The district provides abundant materials and programs to aid in the delivery of curriculum. Some materials, such as Connected Mathematics Program (CMP) and Scott Foresman Reading, are commercially based textbook series. Others are closely connected to researched-based practices, such as leveled-reading libraries for elementary English language arts. Mathematics curriculum documents, for example, contain many complete units that have been developed by NISD teachers. Commercial programs are commonly referred to as "resources," and teachers are not expected to follow textbooks page-by-page. Instead, the focus is on using the very best materials, regardless of source, to address learning standards laid out in each nine-week period. Many more curriculum materials are developed in-house at NISD than are found in most districts.

Instruction

NISD has a clear framework for delivering instruction that relies on and is grounded in research-based practices. Instruction and intervention programs are purposefully designed to meet the learning needs of all students.

- Elementary and intermediary instruction in English language arts is based on a framework of research-based practices, namely a balanced literacy program that includes five aspects of instruction in daily planning: word work, supported reading and thinking, supported writing and thinking, self-selected reading and writing and language arts applications in other subjects.

- NISD makes excellent use of best practices exhibited by other school districts around the country. For example, one unique aspect of secondary instruction is the Writing Institute of Northside (WIN), an affiliate of the New Jersey Writing Project. Through WIN, every teacher attends a three-week summer institute on how to teach writing.

- Mathematics instruction is also based on a framework of research-based practices focused on problem-solving, regular review and the use of software programs for basic facts practice and as an aid for struggling students.

Assessment

The district has developed curriculum benchmark assessments to monitor student learning in relation to state standards and NISD curriculum guides. Assessment data is readily accessible and is used to inform decisions. NISD staff at all levels review data on a regular and systematic basis to make both programmatic decisions and classroom instructional decisions.

- Curriculum diagnostic benchmarks (CDBs) are placed at specific points in the curriculum scope and sequence. When results are available for a particular school, they are immediately reviewed by district- and school-level staff. Principals and teachers know that CDB results are closely examined to determine how well recent curriculum implementation and instruction met expectations for student achievement set forth by the state standards. Initiated when Superintendent Folks joined the district, CDB implementation began in the 2003-2004 school year to drive curriculum and instructional decisions at the school and district levels.

- Assessment data is widely available to inform decisions. CDB scores are turned around in 24 hours; results are provided through an online curriculum management system. Assessment results, disaggregated by school, teacher and student, are immediately reviewed by teachers, the principal and the district to assess student progress and to collaborate on areas of strength and areas for improvement. At the classroom level, teachers use CDB data to assess what re-teaching is necessary. At the school level, principals highlight teachers with good results and encourage them to share their practices so that other teachers may adopt them. At the district level, administrators target school assistance by comparing school results.

- A key way data is made available to staff is through the annual "data day," started by Superintendent Folks in 2004. During these summer sessions, staff at each school receive a binder of demographic and assessment data. Then the district spends the "data day" helping school teams understand the data packet, perform a needs assessment and plan for school improvement.

Instructional Leadership

NISD has clearly defined instructional leadership at all levels of the district that supports teaching and learning. To support teaching and learning, the district makes significant efforts to keep information flowing among district and school-based staff. For example, regular meetings, held vertically and horizontally throughout the district, between the district's office of curriculum instruction and school-based staff, ensure ongoing, meaningful communication about the management of curriculum implementation, instruction and assessment practices. In this way, staff across the district are aware of and can adhere to a common set of teaching and learning expectations.

- Within schools and across grade levels, subject-area committees provide instructional leadership. They meet in each school to review and refine curriculum and address other topics related to teaching and learning. High schools also have an "academic dean" and department chairs who are focused on supporting teaching and learning. High school teachers meet regularly with one another, as well as in grade-level teams, departments or subject-area committees, to plan lessons and review curriculum.

- Designated teachers at every school serve as facilitators between the district's office of curriculum and instruction and school faculty. Full-time reading specialists and mathematics facilitators support individual students and teachers, providing modeling and coaching both in and out of the classroom. They also act as conduits between district instructional leadership and teachers. Reading specialists and mathematics facilitators meet monthly with district-level instructional specialists. Topics from these meetings are relayed to teachers in separate weekly meetings.

- Schools also have social studies and science specialists. While these specialists teach a full schedule, they also attend monthly meetings with district-level instructional specialists.

- Principals, viewed as instructional leaders, are deeply involved in curriculum implementation. Through monthly meetings and study groups, principals are trained to assume the position of instructional leader on a daily basis.

District Leadership

District leadership must support the essential work of teaching and learning in schools. To communicate and realize a clear mission for student learning, research shows that district leadership must set clear strategic goals and hold the organization accountable for implementation. In NISD, the organization and its constituents are held accountable for improving teaching and student learning through a clear mission, ongoing revision and assessment of the district's strategic plan, an active and committed governing body and an accountability system grounded in transparency and communication.

Mission, Vision and Values

A shared understanding of and commitment to the NISD mission, vision and core values is found among board members, district administrators, principals and teachers. This commitment has been fostered through deliberate actions on the part of district leadership.

- Upon his arrival in 2003, Superintendent Folks convened stakeholders from the district and community to revisit the district's mission and ensure a commitment to encourage each student to

strive for personal excellence and to ensure that all students learn, function, contribute and compete as responsible individuals in an ever-changing world.

- District activities reflect NISD's commitment to placing children first. Over the last five years, the district has reallocated resources to needy schools, assigning additional coaches and expanding gifted and talented programs. The superintendent has also placed student achievement at the center of NISD's professional culture by making data available and transparent and by welcoming performance comparisons among various schools, helping educators identify and seek out best practices.

Strategic Planning

The NISD strategic plan, developed with input from a variety of key stakeholders, is revised regularly, based on data and a continuous cycle of reflection. This is particularly crucial given the astonishing population growth rate the district faces. With nearly 82,000 students, Northside recently became the fourth-largest Texas district and is expected to grow by some 4,000 students per year.

- The district's strategic plan, developed in 2003, was based on data including input from stakeholders across the district and district-conducted studies of demographic trends.

- The district uses data to assess quarterly its progress towards meeting the goals in the strategic plan, carefully analyzing CDBs and state tests to adjust and refine strategic priorities at the district, school and classroom levels. Also quarterly, staff members from all three central divisions (Administration, Business and Finance and Curriculum and Instruction) are involved in updating action plans under the strategic plan for review by the school board.

District Governance

The NISD school board and the superintendent are active participants in the state legislature. NISD believes a close relationship between the governing body and district leadership is central to student success.

- Several NISD board members hold leadership roles in Texas school governance: one represents Northside on the Texas Association of School Boards and has served as its president; another founded the Bexar School Board Presidents' Coalition—a coalition of San Antonio-area school districts that promotes good governance practices. The superintendent is also vice president of the Texas Association of School Administrators. Members of the NISD school board and the superintendent have actively advocated before the Texas legislature and state courts for additional funding for public education, particularly in fast-growing districts.

Performance and Accountability

The NISD accountability system is grounded in efforts to create healthy, transparent competition among schools, to offer ongoing opportunities for personnel to learn from one another and to use this transparency and collaboration to drive recognition and intervention needs.

- Early in his tenure, the superintendent made student achievement scores public on a school-by-school basis. As a result, discussions regarding achievement results have become the cornerstone of summer meetings and rallies across the district. The advent of the curriculum management system, which makes quarterly results for all schools available on the web, exemplifies the superintendent's

continual push to place data in front of his staff along with the resounding message that all staff are accountable for student performance.

- The superintendent's push to make data public sent a clear message about commitment to student achievement across the district. This message continues to be reinforced throughout the district on a weekly basis through the superintendent's "Monday messages," e-mails sent to every employee in the district to celebrate individual and school successes and to keep the NISD community abreast of district and state news.

- Stakeholders reported that the transparent use of data is now systemic. Staff in all schools expect that their results will be compared to those of other schools, and they understand that the district's expectation is to seek out those who have achieved at the highest level so all can learn from them. This is not a punitive process; rather, it is a process that provides recognition for schools that are doing well and intervention for schools that need additional support.

Operations and Support Systems

Research shows that the design and implementation of district operations and systems directly impact how well teaching and learning is supported. In NISD, strong fiscal practices, a strategic organizational structure that relies heavily on collaboration and communication and a comprehensive professional development program have increased learning and growth opportunities for students and teachers.

Allocation of Financial Resources

NISD took clear steps several years ago to ensure balanced budgets, fiscal stability and equitable decision-making processes that support student achievement.

- From 2003 to 2005, NISD worked to correct a budget deficit. In 2003, the district cut $23 million by freezing salaries and also succeeded in securing $439 million in bonds. These actions have helped NISD meet the challenge of rapid growth, even though it reports receiving insufficient state financial support.

- The budget process is driven by a five-year, tiered, forecasting budget model developed by district personnel that takes into account rapid growth in student enrollment and state funding formulas. Following formulaic allocations for staff funding based on enrollment projections, "improvement" funds are allocated to newly identified needs in areas of rapid growth. Allocations of "improvement" funds are determined based on input from school-based leadership teams as well as data analysis at the district level.

Organizational Structures and Management

NISD deliberately maintains a lean district staff and chooses not to regionalize its district structure. Clear organizational structures that link district support staff to school-embedded support staff are in place. Through a system of regular meetings, NISD generates a culture of close collaboration and frequent communication that supports student learning.

- Although the district is large, district leadership chose *not* to organize into regions or smaller compartments to serve its 94 schools and more than 80,000 students. The superintendent strongly believes that regionalization—and the additional layer it creates in the system—should be avoided as

long as possible. Despite rapid growth of an additional 10,000 students in the past four years, the district has added only a few central office positions. Instead, the NISD strategy is to increase staff resources in schools, where the positions directly affect teaching and learning.

- To manage personnel in a manner that effectively supports student achievement, NISD holds monthly meetings to keep the link between school-based personnel and district-based personnel active. There are clear district contacts with whom each group of school-based staff meets regularly. A centralized calendar coordinates the many district-wide meetings, and district-level personnel coordinate with each other so the large number of meetings is tightly and coherently packaged. The resulting culture is one of shared responsibility at all levels for the success of students in the classroom.

- The well-orchestrated set of monthly meetings ensures a good communication flow, common understanding of key initiatives and a sense of shared purpose. One key result is a strong sense of community among district and school personnel, described as "The Northside Way."

Support for Teaching and Learning

NISD provides comprehensive professional development to support both new and experienced teachers and principals. These activities are carefully coordinated and aligned with long-term plans to improve teaching and learning.

- For teachers, professional development begins with the New Teacher Academy for all new NISD teachers, irrespective of their past experience. The district provides mentoring to all first-year teachers.

- Northside supports new principals by providing an administration internship and management program—a series of weekly two-hour classes that familiarize new administrators with every aspect of the district. To build its pipeline of future school leaders, NISD often invites teachers considering entering school administration to sit in on these seminars. The district also provides mentors to new principals.

- Ongoing professional development opportunities are extensive. Courses are offered after school and on weekends, and the district provides six early release days during the year to allow teachers time for professional development.