



Sharing Lessons From Reward Schools to Improve Learning in Texas

The challenge: Decades of research have shown the harmful effects of poverty on student performance. Title I schools in Texas face particular challenges, including high rates of students living in poverty, high student mobility, and large proportions of English learners. Despite these difficulties, in 2014, 6% of Title I public schools in Texas beat the odds—that is, these schools exceeded state standards and earned distinction as “Reward Schools.” What accounted for the unexpected success of these schools? Working closely with the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Comprehensive Center set out to answer this question and share lessons learned to benefit students throughout the state.

Our Work

Texas Comprehensive Center staff collaborated with state leaders to conduct case studies that highlighted Reward Schools' best practices in 2015. State leaders shared findings from these initial case studies with the state's schools and districts.¹ Then, recognizing an opportunity to take the work to the next level, Center experts worked

with the state on a new round of case study research on Reward Schools. Center experts used sophisticated geographic information system (GIS) software to harness publicly available school data in identifying new Reward Schools in specific geographic areas.

These new case study sites included seven schools with a mix of sizes, school types (charter and traditional), and settings (urban and rural), from a variety of regions in the state. The chosen schools served more than 3,000 students, with an average of 442 students in each school. All schools were close to dense clusters of low-performing schools (that is, schools that could benefit the most from learning how a nearby school thrived while facing the same challenges). Building on the previous lessons learned, experts expanded the information captured in the case studies and worked to make sure that the knowledge would reach more Texas schools—potentially improving teaching and learning for even more students in Texas.

At a statewide conference in 2016, principals from three case study Reward Schools presented and answered questions about the practices that helped their schools succeed. The Center worked with the state to publicly release these reports on the Texas Education Agency's website.²

The Center plans to include future Reward School principals in presentations at statewide and national conferences, develop a community of practice for Reward School principals that will enable them to collaborate and pool their knowledge, and partner Reward Schools (as "lab sites") with low-performing schools that are demographically similar.

Throughout the case study project, Center experts provided on-the-job training and professional development to the Texas Education Agency and regional colleagues on

"We can take a system that has worked and share it with a demographically similar campus in the same region, tweaking the strategy to suit the low-performing campus. This is really about creating a foundation, a starting place for our campuses to then move forward."

—Senior Administrator,
Texas Education Agency

"The new case studies are helping us identify the systems that are working in school districts."

—Senior Administrator,
Texas Education Agency

WHAT IS A REWARD SCHOOL?

The Texas Education Agency considers a Reward School a high-performance or high-progress school that is a Title I school and has met state distinctions in reading and math performance. At the high school level, a Reward School is a Title I school with the highest graduation rates. A high-progress school is identified as a Title I school in the top 25% in annual improvement and/or a school in the top 25% of those demonstrating ability to close performance gaps based on system safeguards.*

* For more details on the state's identification process see http://tea.texas.gov/Student_Testing_and_Accountability/Monitoring_and_Interventions/School_Improvement_and_Support/Priority,_Focus,_and_Reward_Schools/.

¹ The 2015 findings reports are available at http://tea.texas.gov/Student_Testing_and_Accountability/Monitoring_and_Interventions/School_Improvement_and_Support/Reward_School_Case_Studies/.

² The statewide summary report and individual school reports can be found at http://tea.texas.gov/Student_Testing_and_Accountability/Monitoring_and_Interventions/School_Improvement_and_Support/Reward_School_Case_Studies/.

conducting principal and staff interviews, student interviews, and teacher focus groups during case study site visits. The team from the Texas Center for District and School Support, a partner organization, also filmed staff and students in action at three of the participating Reward Schools (view the videos at <http://www.taisresources.net>). Team members collaborated to analyze and interpret data collected during the case study site visits. Center experts provided training on qualitative data analysis methods and software to Texas Education Agency colleagues, which the team used in developing reports on individual schools as well as statewide findings.

Best practices from the case study schools have been disseminated across the state. According to survey data, 83% of 2014–15 Reward School principals were subsequently contacted by other districts, schools, or the media to learn more about the strategies they had used to substantially improve the teaching and learning in their schools.

“We’re used to saying, ‘This is a state requirement. Why aren’t you doing it?’ The emphasis here was more, ‘Well, how did you get here?’ The case studies were really good for opening up that lens.”

—Senior Administrator,
Texas Education Agency

Feedback from survey respondents about the Reward Schools project:

“We continue to find ways to apply information to other projects from the Reward School project.”

“Our engagement in data resources has allowed us to inform and support other state initiatives.”

Next Steps

Innovative GIS mapping techniques helped the state identify “hot spots” where Reward Schools are concentrated in geographic areas, including areas in which one would not expect to find clusters of high-performing schools. One such spot is in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas, which is a high-poverty area along the Mexican border. As part of the strategic vision developed with the Texas Comprehensive Center, state officials will next examine policies and procedures at the regional and district level that are most closely associated with key clusters of Reward Schools in this area (that is, the practices that will be most relevant to their neighboring districts as well as to districts across the state).

The comprehensive case study of this region will expand understanding beyond the school level and will inform state grant making, policy, and technical assistance for Title I schools. The study is designed

to be a springboard for strategic partnerships at the state and regional level that will replicate successful practices within specific regions. Struggling districts will be given tools that have been used, refined, and proven successful in neighboring districts with the same student demographics, and schools will receive support in using those tools successfully. As the Reward Schools and Rio Grande projects demonstrate, the Texas Comprehensive Center is helping the state improve teaching and student learning by showing how school leadership, instructional staff, and district staff can develop systems and cultures of achievement and support.

THE CRITICAL SUCCESS FACTORS

The Texas Reward Schools had a history of successfully implementing the seven Critical Success Factors identified by the state:

1. Academic Performance
2. Use of Quality Data to Drive Instruction
3. Leadership Effectiveness
4. Increased Learning Time
5. Family and Community Engagement
6. School Climate
7. Teacher Quality

The identified Reward Schools also had supportive districts—the schools all had district leaders who provided them the professional development they needed and who gave them enough autonomy to run their campuses according to their needs.

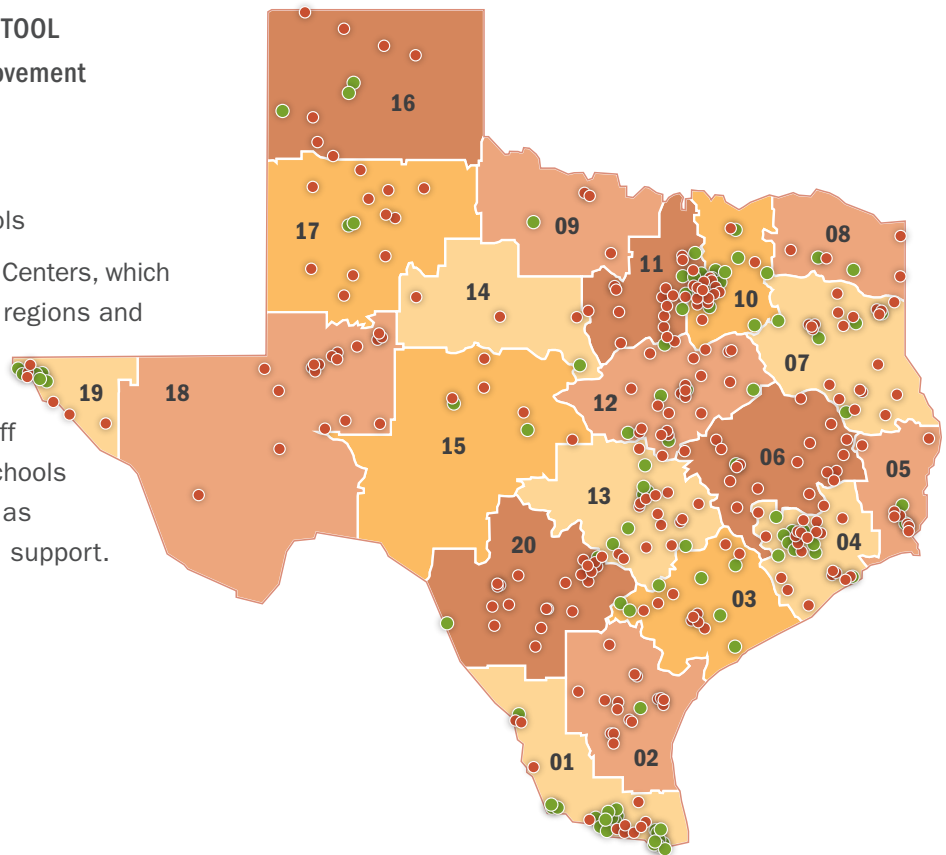
SNAPSHOT FROM GIS MAPPING TOOL

Texas Reward Schools and Improvement Required Schools

● Reward Schools

● Improvement Required Schools

Texas has 20 Education Service Centers, which are represented by the colored regions and numbers (e.g., Region 1 is along the border with Mexico and is labeled “01”). Center staff used this GIS map to identify schools that had beat the odds as well as schools that needed additional support.



To learn more about the Texas Comprehensive Center, visit <http://texas-cc.org>.

Comprehensive Centers

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About the Comprehensive Centers

Funded by the U.S. Department of Education, the federal Comprehensive Centers Program supports 15 Regional and seven Content Centers to help increase state capacity to assist districts and schools in meeting student achievement goals. AIR leads four regional centers—Great Lakes, Midwest, Southeast, and Texas—and two national content centers that support all 50 states and U.S. territories—the College and Career Readiness and Success Center (CCRS) and the Center on Great Teachers and Leaders (GTL).



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