

Educational Reform in Texas through Alternative Education: A Successful Case Study

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Abstract

This article traces the development of high-stakes assessments in public education in Texas, with the focus primarily on the exit examination required for graduation in grades K-12. The article also traces the results of that exit exam as we look at the alternative education settings that have been developed to assure that at-risk, economically disadvantaged students meet the requirements of the exit examination in order to receive their high school diploma. A case study approach is included as we visit one alternative high school setting which was established to assure that these students are well served by their teachers, staff and the school as a whole. The school is also intended to ensure they receive their high school diploma and become productive members of society upon graduation.

Background Information

The current educational reform movement in Texas actually began over 20 years ago. The year was 1984 and those of us who were employed in public education well remember the push from business interests headed by H. Ross Perot, which stated that Texas public education must be brought into the high-tech age. The deeper rooted conflict was fueled by the challenge of unequal distribution of resources among the Texas school districts, which were a result of supplemental funding from local property taxes. These taxes resulted in great spending differences among districts, highly correlated with the ethnic makeup of the districts (Carnoy, Loeb and Smith, 2001). At the time of this writing, this funding issue continues to plague public education in Texas.

Another conflict had actually begun in the '70s when a group of high tech and services businesses challenged the state's traditional agriculture and oil interests, (Carnoy et al., 2001). Perot's support group also began to seek resolution of the pressures for equalized school funding exerted by low-income minority groups. The Reform Act of 1984 was the major educational reform of the period, (Carnoy et al., 2001).

High Stakes Tests and the Accountability Movement in Texas

The reform actually went through two rounds in 1984 and 1987; by 1991 it was institutionalized into Texas politics. The reform included increasing funds for low-spending districts and a strategic plan, which included learning standards for each grade; statewide assessments linked to the standards; individual schools' accountability for assessment results and local control of how results would be achieved (Grissmer and Flanagan, 1998). Governor Ann Richards led the decentralization reform, which gave the state control of both standards and testing, but gave schools choice in how to meet the state goals. After 1995 the reform was continued by Governor George W. Bush, (Carnoy et al., 2001). The state, through the Texas Education Agency, continues to this day to control the standards through the state adopted curriculum, followed by all school districts.

Texas began implementation of the testing required by the reform under the name Texas Educational Assessment of Minimum Skills (TEAMS) during the 1980s. This was followed by the more comprehensive and more difficult Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) tests. The tenth grade test was used as a high school graduation requirement for the first time in school year 1990-1991. The TAAS testing was expanded to additional grades of 3, 6 and 8 in 1994, (Carnoy et al., 2001). The test soon faced the criticism of being labeled a high stakes test, since it would be the determiner of whether or not Texas students graduated high school. The TAAS tests continued through 1999, when it was replaced by the current test, Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). Passing rates on TAAS math and reading tests improved substantially during this five year period in every grade, particularly among disadvantaged students, (Carnoy et al., 2001).

The statewide scores for Texas on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) show similar improvements during this same five years. Gains in the fourth grade math NAEP in Texas outpaced national gains from 1992 to 1996, (Carnoy et al., 2001). Reading scores for Texas students on the NAEP improved, keeping pace with national gains between 1994 and 1998 (Klein, Hamilton, McCaffrey, and Stecher, 2000).

The Texas Assessment of Academic Skills resulted in Texas having the most visible testing program, with its battery of tests administered every spring to all public school students in grades three to eight and again in grade ten with its high stakes assessment.

The schools have been evaluated through 1999 on percentage of students who passed TAAS and the percentage of low income and minority students who passed. Schools that perform well were given an exemplary designation and bonuses

Making schools accountable through state testing was the focus of national educational reform in the 1990s. Forty states use test scores for school accountability purposes, (Stecher and Barro, 1999). However, many critics disagree with the new accountability systems. They argue that testing does not promote real improvement in

student learning. They claim that school teachers and administrators are inclined to meet standards by teaching the test rather than creating an improved learning environment. Further, they claim that these assessment tests may actually reduce opportunities to learn higher-order skills, particularly for low-income students, (McNeil and Valenzuela, 1999). Additionally, critics also claim state testing increases the probability that disadvantaged student populations will drop out of school when forced to repeat grades, (Haney, 2000; Schrag 2000). Also, none of the low dropout states use these tests, (Heubert and Hauser, 1999). States with high dropout rates were compared to states with low dropout rates by researchers Kreitzer, Madaus and Haney (1989) and found to have high-stakes graduation tests.

Alternative Schools—Additional Accountability

In spite of critics, educational reform in Texas continued to rely on testing in an effort to meet accountability required at the state level. Calls for accountability seem to usually arise from the political community. When the political community demands that tests serve high-stakes accountability functions, professional testing standards can be easily compromised. “In accountability contexts, test results decide which students are retained in grade, held back from graduation, and assigned to tracks or special classifications...high-stakes testing produces teaching and testing practices that lead to inflated test scores and further disadvantage already disadvantaged students,” (Smith and Fey, 2000, p. 334).

To call for educational accountability is also to express dissatisfaction with the status of public schools or who is believed to control them. Such dissatisfaction was resurrected (there have been several eras of discontent) by *A Nation at Risk*, 1983. The message of that document and many that followed was that public schools are failing to address and meet ambitious academic standards and that such failure threatens American economic competitiveness...Although alternative policies might have been introduced to reform schools (e.g., equalization of financial resources across schools, professional development to revitalize the professional workforce, lower class size, or universal preschool), achievement tests became the principal mechanism by which educational entities could demonstrate their accountability (Smith et al., 2000, p. 335).

On the other hand, test validity is the quality of an instrument to produce truthful inferences about what is being measured. Associations to which test specialists belong agree that the validity standard depends on the test's context and use. A test may be validated for some uses and not others (Smith et al., 2000). McDonnell (1997) found that the political community believed the benefits of the assessment policy would outweigh any harm that might be caused by less than reliable or invalid tests.

Some may wonder why teaching to the test is not a good practice and a healthy basic skills emphasis. They may even suggest that teaching to the test results is basic

instruction even in the least advantaged educational situations. Research indicates that there is little evidence to indicate that high-stakes accountability testing and reform have had much impact on overall school performance beyond increased scores on the individual test that was the instrument of the state policy (Mehrens, 1998). Construct validity of TAAS fell short of professional standards in other ways:

While Texas scores on the math part of the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) have risen dramatically—the results, perhaps, of all that drill and test practice—Texas students made only small gains in the NAEP reading test between 1992 and 1998, no gain whatever between 1993 and 1996 on nationally normed achievement tests in reading, and not much gain in other subjects... They have not made much gain on the SAT, either (Schrag, 2000).

Since 1999, Texas has begun to administer the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills exam and has continued to follow the high stakes consequences for failing the tests at the 3, 6 and 10th grades. This current test battery has been said to be more difficult than the earlier basic skills exams.

Alternative Education

One result of the wide use of exams to measure student achievement has been the growth of alternative education. The website for the Texas Association for Alternative Education describes these programs as beginning about fifteen years ago in Dallas, Texas and now having 1,000 members. Alternative education in Texas includes charter schools, schools of choice, disciplinary settings, GED locations and Juvenile Justice alternative education programs (<http://www.tea.state.tx.us/aea/>). The literature describes a number of charter schools with good success records and some with an unsuccessful record, which have also been covered in local newspapers. So what best describes alternative education? One of the ten elements of the Workforce Investment Act states that alternative secondary school services must be offered. Alternative Education programs serve specific youth ranging from discipline problems to the homeless or runaways, dropouts, low achievers, those with medical, family, or drug abuse, existing pregnancy or parenthood, gifted/talented, or older students in need of credits in order to continue postsecondary education, (Wagner, Wonacott and Jackson, 2005). While they are different from the more traditional education programs, they may be offered in a different location, use different models/delivery systems or focus on particular careers with specialized curricula. Common threads incorporated into alternative education include experiential education; integrated curriculum; hands-on learning; individualized programming; active student engagement; a holistic approach, which includes family, school, and community; recognition and accommodation of various learning styles; and authentic assessment, (Wagner, et al., 2005).

One author, Jerry Conrath, (2001) has stated that “alternative education can become a catalyst for America’s unrealized hopes. Alternative schools can help many of

our young people overcome their most debilitating handicaps: the rampant pessimism, the failure to trust in effort, and the lack of confidence in our institutions caused by generational poverty...If alternative educators are to help children of poverty develop personally and obtain a high-quality education, they must show other educators what to do and persuade them that the agenda of alternative schools is consistent with the ideology of public education,” (Conrath, 2001, p 585). These students have been described as feeling they have no control over their lives; many fear success more than failure as success does not fit their mental snapshot of who they are, (Conrath, 2001). An essay by Robert DeBlois (2000) argues for “establishing well-funded alternative schools of all varieties to counteract the alienation, impersonality, and social conformity characterizing most large, comprehensive high schools,” (Hadderman, 2002, p. 6). DeBlois supports other researchers who have stated that small schools “are places where students get more attention, perform better, and are happier,” (Hadderman, 2002, p. 7). One expert stated “what a youngster who doesn’t thrive in one school environment needs is another environment,” (Raywid, 2001, pp. 582-84).

Another expert, Gregory, (2001) believes that “today’s big high schools are dinosaurs that are successful only with an elite group of students; everyone else requires a different delivery system resembling that embodied in our best alternative schools,” (Hadderman, 2002, p. 8). A noted educational leader in New York City’s public education sector (Meier) believes that many of the assessment tools used in small schools, such as oral defenses, portfolios and exhibitions are more reliable indicators of real-life success than the standardized tests that are used in most schools to evaluate students’ progress, (Hadderman, 2002, p. 9).

One study that was reviewed reported a rise in the number of alternative education programs serving youth at-risk for education failure. However, when the definition is expanded to include charter schools, those within juvenile detention centers, community based schools operated by districts, those with evening and weekend schedules, the number increases greatly. The National Center on Educational Statistics, for the 2000-2001 school year reported 10,900 public alternative schools and programs, which served 612,000 students in the United States, (Kleiner et al., 2002).

One of the study’s purposes included determination of the educational and support services of alternative programs. Results indicate that the predominant support services appear to be social workers at 74%, followed by counselors at 58%, paraprofessionals at 50%, school nurses at 46%, school psychologists at 46% and vocational educators at 42% (Foley and Pang, 2006). This same study reported funding sources as a variety, with state grants and appropriations funding about 50% of the programs. State and district appropriations were predominant sources for the remaining programs, (Foley et al., 2006). Efforts to increase school involvement of parents appear to be limited to one-third of the reporting program,s (Foley et al., 2006). General education curriculum was the predominant instructional arrangement offered by these alternative programs, (Foley et al., 2006).

In summary, this study found that alternative school youth seem to have a diverse set of academic and social-emotional characteristics which require highly skilled and effective educators. Educators employed in these programs need to be aware of the community resources available to support the youth and must have communication and collaboration skills to work with related service personnel, community professionals, students and their families, (Foley et al., 2006).

A Successful Case Study

One of the co-authors of this paper was invited to visit Richarte High School in Georgetown ISD. Richarte High School is the academic alternative school-of-choice for students residing in GISD. RHS currently serves a total of 85 students whose ages range from 16 to 20. Due to rolling admissions, the school serves approximately 140 students during each school year. Two instructional sessions are offered in order to accommodate the students who are served. Students may also attend a full-day if they are behind in credits or chose to accelerate their date for completing coursework. The waiting list in 2005-2006 was over 100 students. By October of 2006, fifty students had picked up applications, however, by the end of the same month, only 40 had been completed and returned. Not all students who begin the intake process follow it through to completion. Turning in an application does not ensure acceptance into Richarte. Acceptance is based on a number of things including: the number of spaces that become available as students complete coursework, the at-risk factors of each student who applies, and students' individual reasons for wanting to attend the school. Existing data from the 9th grade TAKS scores, current transcript, student written essay on "Why I Want to be at Richarte High School," are used as the starting point for the intake process. The principal and social worker also communicate with Georgetown High School staff.

Students who apply must be at least 16 years of age and reside in GISD. Any student can pick up an application. Those who attend Richarte are considered at-risk for a variety of factors including, but not limited to credit deficiency, difficulty succeeding in a more traditional school, illness, family issues or teen parenthood, (Information packet, 2006). The majority of students, 58 percent, enrolled at Richarte High School are Caucasian; 73 percent are economically disadvantaged (for total percentages of current enrollment by race and economic status, (see Chart 1 and 3).

Richarte High School's history began in spring 1988 through the organization of the Georgetown Educational Task Force. This committee was made up of district representatives, Southwestern University staff, the City of Georgetown, and representatives from the community. Its purpose was "to develop and pursue innovative ideas that would improve the educational environment in Georgetown," (History of Richarte High School, 2003). A variety of programs were initiated including the concept of an alternative education center with child care provided that would be different from the existing disciplinary alternative education program, (History of Richarte High School, 2003).

Four groups of students were to be served by the high school program: Capable students behind in their credits or those with other personal issues creating a group of students at-risk of dropping out of high school, teenage parents, capable students who had already dropped out, and adults who did not complete high school. (For current statistics on teen parents and economic status see Charts 2 and 3). Options available to the students would include a diploma, GED certificate, and a means of recovering their credits. Students entering would be offered a high school completion program through a computer-assisted, self-paced environment and childcare for those needing the service and willing to participate in an early childhood development component. By September 1991, both the center and the childcare facility opened, following receipt of a grant from Meadows Foundation and the granting of variances from the Georgetown Planning and Zoning Commission. The first graduation forty-one students received their diplomas or GED certificates at the ceremony in May 1992. At the request of Richarte students, the school board changed the name of the high school on December 12, 1994.

In spring 1998, the district worked with Coca-Cola Company and was successful in receiving funds to purchase and construct a new child development center adjacent to Richarte High School. Graduation ceremonies have been held in the Georgetown High School Performing Arts Center since 1999, (History of Richarte High School, 2003). Today, RHS is a state accredited high school and offers all of the courses required to earn the TEA Recommended high school diploma. The school no longer offers the GED program. Students are normally scheduled for four academic periods (or 7 if the full-day is chosen), and are required to attend each scheduled class. Students' courses are guided by their transcript, their Personal Graduation Plan, and grouping to facilitate instruction. The principal is responsible for the master schedule. Special schedules may be developed for students in certain circumstances, for example, those who need only one or two courses to graduate or those who can complete courses in credit recovery. (For recent graduation statistics see Chart 4).

The GISD curriculum, which is TEKS based, is presented to students using research based instructional strategies in a small group and/or one-on-one setting. The principal and teachers monitor instructional strategies / programs to ensure they are tied to TEKS and promote increased academic understanding for all students. Richarte's learning environment addresses students' specific needs along with state and national standards. State results for 2005 document that 82 percent of the students who completed the exit exams required by the state in order to graduate from high school passed the state exam for all three required subject areas (Texas Education Agency, 2006).

Professional development is ongoing. The principal, teachers, and staff self-select professional sessions/workshops/ conferences with the shared goal of improving student performance. Teachers and principal choose to receive training in classroom instruction and interventions which are research-based. The staff meets twice each month to plan program modifications and analyze student progress. Students receive increased instructional time outside the regular hours of each school day.

Students are provided a safe and nurturing learning environment that addresses their specific needs. Expectations for student success is high and there is ongoing academic and emotional support. There are no bells within the small school building, except a hand held old school bell which is rung at the end of both morning and afternoon sessions. Each session begins with the pledge of allegiance to both the United States and Texas flags, and a minute of silence. During this period the principal brings the students up to date with any important announcements, to include changes in the daily schedule, substitutes in the building, guests that may be visiting, and any exciting news that applies to the school or its students. After announcements students are dismissed to their first period classes.

Students are divided equally among the teachers into small groups for a weekly advisory period. Advisory time is scheduled every Friday for the first thirty minutes of school, which takes five minutes from each of their daily courses. During advisory teachers answer questions dealing with everything from ensuring that students are on track with their graduation plans, to assistance with completing scholarship applications, study and registering for the SAT/ACT, using the computers to access information about careers. One of the teachers commented the reasons for our success is, "We are student centered; we take care of the whole child. There's emotional support provided by our social worker, health issues are referred to the nurse, and the teachers focus on the academic side of the students' development. Some of the students' young children are provided with district day care in the building next door."

The full-time faculty consists of two math, two English, one social studies, one science, and one business education teacher. In addition there are four part-time teachers who teach the Diversified Career Prep, Physical Education & Health, Art, and Spanish courses. The supporting staff consists of a principal, registered nurse, who is also GISD's nurse coordinator, assistant to the nurse, PEIMS /Registrar secretary, principal secretary, and social worker. The researcher interviewed the business teacher, a math teacher, the science teacher, the school's licensed clinical social worker (LCSW), and the principal.

The first interview was with the science instructor. When asked if she teaches to the state exit exam she stated, "I teach the goals and objectives of the TEKS and follow the GISD curriculum. I feel if you're a good teacher, stay active, keep students engaged in the subject, then they will be ready to take the state exam. I give them help with the formal vocabulary of the test and the format issues. For the October EXIT retesting, I teamed with the technology teacher to review with students the major objectives to be tested using classroom instruction along with PLATO TAKS software." When asked why Richarte was successful at raising test scores on the TAKS test she replied, "We put students first. Having smaller numbers of students allows us to really focus on both their strength and weaknesses in any content area. Also, the faculty supports one another and district administration supports the faculty and the campus. Recently, the Superintendent came through and talked to the students. The principal supports us – anything I need I can get as long as it's tied back to our Campus Improvement Plan Goals and there is a student need."

She also says that social issues at Richarte are handled on an individual student basis; few rules are necessary, and discipline problems are nonexistent. She stressed that there is respect on this small campus—students show it more and faculty show it more to each other. She stated that a few commonalities between small and large campuses are they both teach state mandated curriculum and have main core classes. But she felt that the main difference is that teachers must be more flexible and multi-task. “Students are more responsible here—they want to be here,” she added.

When asked how she handled the need for lab activities without a formal lab setting, she replied, “We spend 50% of our time in lab activities--no difference. In the Anatomy & Physiology class, we have dissected a large number of animals—actually everything from worms to cats!” She ended our interview session with the comment, “I love it here—don’t ever want to leave. If you love teaching—love students, you will like this setting. If it were more rigid, I wouldn’t like it; this works for me.”

The next interview was with the business education teacher. Along with teaching business courses, she also monitors and assists students who use credit-recovery software called Plato. This software is installed on every computer within the school. The program is designed to assist students needing credit recovery to regain credits which they have lost due to attendance or failing end of course grades. It is also being used in special individual cases as credit acceleration. This computerized program has proved to be successful with students who have a hard time concentrating, students who are accelerated, and those who are recovered drop-outs. When asked how this school differed from the larger high school campuses, she commented, “This environment is less structured. We meet all of the students needs. If some student is having a bad day and needs a hug, they get it. The campus motto is: *Sometimes Making A Difference Means Being The Difference*. All of us honor that and live up to it. The teachers here are caring and nurturing. Nobody is ever too busy to talk with a student—they don’t get lost in the crowd. We are more likely to pull them aside or suggest they talk to the social worker—things don’t go unnoticed.” When questioned about parental support for the students, she replied that it was “Ok, but all of these students are at-risk and many do not live with parents.” She added, “There is a lot of community support.”

The social worker has been with the school for five years and has a Master’s degree in Social Work. She has previous experience counseling in schools, and considers teenagers her “passion”. She has worked with alcohol and drug abuse in school settings, assessments for adults, juvenile probation, and intervention services. When questioned about how different it is in this small school setting, she stated, “It’s difficult to know all the students in a large high school. Here the teachers and staff communicate about student needs. We are aware of what is affecting student behavior and try to make adjustments accordingly. There is administrative support. Georgetown ISD is different from other districts to begin with—there is energy compared to other districts in support of mental health.”

When asked if student issues have changed she said, “Somewhat—there use to be more depression and suicidal tendencies, more drug and alcohol issues. Now when I see students they might be considering dropping out. We have more honors students—higher academic students with social or anxiety issues – some have been bullied in the larger school setting. Divorce, violence, depression, abuse-- family issues seem to be more frequent.”

When asked about a typical day she replied, “Some days are uneventful. Yesterday we had a crisis situation.” She responded to the question about parental support with, “Most times if I call parents they come in—we let them know we are here if anything happens. We care about who comes to this school—we talk and involve the students in solutions. If needed or asked for, I also refer students to outside counseling services. We make it work; we communicate with each other.”

The math teacher interviewed has been teaching at Richarte for five years. After twenty years at Georgetown High School she chose to make the switch because she needed a change. She believes that by working with students in a smaller environment she is much more likely to have a positive impact on students and their learning. When asked about the difference between a large campus and this small campus she replied, “Students here can work at their own pace. Depending on their cognitive abilities in a subject, they can move more quickly or take more time. We strive to help students understand the concepts rather than move them on due to school calendar constraints. We probably would have done the same thing on the big campus, but it’s impossible due to the number of students. In large schools you try to fit everybody into the same hole – it doesn’t work. Also, I think in the past we spent too much time having kids memorize—there was less understanding of higher level concepts and this catches up with them eventually in a subject area as sequential as math.” She also appreciates being able to use manipulatives to complement math in the areas of representations, methods or processes. She feels that worksheets have their place, but should not be overused or take the place of instruction. She further added, “Some mathematicians get stuck in verbal, tabular, graphing and symbolic math. Some students have trouble with this.”

When asked what’s been the biggest difference in your teaching here, she replied, “I am able to form a more personal relationship with students—we get to know each other. I know each student’s academic strengths and weaknesses in the subject matter.”

The topic of mandated testing was mentioned and she said “students must be able to work with different representations” –she did not think too much time is spent on exit exams. “Students need format exposure and I supplied that in both settings.”

The topic of discipline was mentioned and she said, “...mutual respect is more apparent here. There is not usually any disruptive behavior. I had a new student who showed a lack of respect for me and three or four of the returning students set that student straight and the problem went away. The students feel more secure in this setting and are not afraid to ask for help if they are not understanding the concepts—that is most helpful in the classroom.”

The final interview was with the principal, who has been at Richarte for just four years. She began by saying, “we were both surprised and honored to have been recognized as an exemplary school by receiving the Governor’s Grant Award. The teachers and staff members at this school are first rate professionals. My role is to provide ongoing assistance and support to teachers as we continue to develop a learning environment where students progress academically, know they are respected as young adults, and feel safe and supported as they gain self-confidence in their abilities.” When questioned about following state curriculum, she responded, “we teach GISD’s adopted TEKS based curriculum for grades 9-12. Textbooks and supplementary materials used have been adopted by GISD. The content is challenging and meaningful. Teacher expectation for student success is high. Materials and content used are based on the individual academic needs of each student. Teachers use state and district assessment data to provide flexible/high quality program design and implementation. Thinking Maps, United Streaming, audio tapes, manipulatives, Geographic Information Systems (GIS), PLATO software, Rosetta Stone, Bloom’s Taxonomy, and Carnegie math are some of the supplementary materials used to enhance the curriculum. Curriculum improvement is a continuous process.”

Questions connected to team approach to serving students was answered, “teachers work together to provide multiple opportunities for students to read and write across the curriculum. There is some integration of objectives and instruction between the courses. For example, when a student studies the local government section in the Government course, he/she attends a local government meeting, gathers information, and then presents to a group of his/her peers what has been learned via a PowerPoint slide show. The student may work on the slide show in a technology class fulfilling a partial assignment requirement in that class.”

Staff development was the next issue discussed and she responded “Richarte staff has ongoing opportunities for professional development. During staff meetings we share current research & literature and discuss the impact from these on classroom instruction. We adopt the spirit of ongoing inquiry as we study and apply research based practices for instruction.”

When asked why the school has been so successful the principal responded, “It’s a combination of things—the students are treated with respect, they are safe here and have a ‘fresh start’ with tremendous adult support. This is very important for our students who are living on their own. Students who are residing at home have parents who are very pleased and support our efforts. In addition, the small size is conducive to learning. There are few distractions to the learning process. There is the expectation for very good attendance because each student has chosen to attend Richarte and they know there is a waiting list. High expectations—we tell them we know what they are capable of doing in their coursework and with their lives.” Without any prompting from the researcher she added, “Together - teachers, staff, parents, administration, school board and community members, have raised the “academic bar” and personal support for

students who are at risk in so many ways. Richarte High School will continue to evolve to meet the ever changing needs of the students we have the privilege to serve.”

These interviews and observation of the students, faculty and support staff verified what was already known about Richarte High School. One student’s unsolicited comment to me as he left the classroom was, “These teachers care and that’s what works.”

Effective School Practices

This article began with a brief overview about the reform movement in education which had its beginnings in the 1980s, which was followed by extensive research related to what is effective practice, an increase in the use of state testing, and finally the necessity to establish alternative schools. It is only fitting that the selected case study – Richarte High School—exemplifies the application of effective practice that grew out of that reform and its pervasive concern that our education system must be certain that all students receive a quality education. “Given, however, that we know something about what makes schools effective, it seems worthwhile to ask the question about whether the techniques, processes and procedures which arguably work in schools will also get results with at-risk youth in schools,” (Druian and Butler, 1987, p.1).

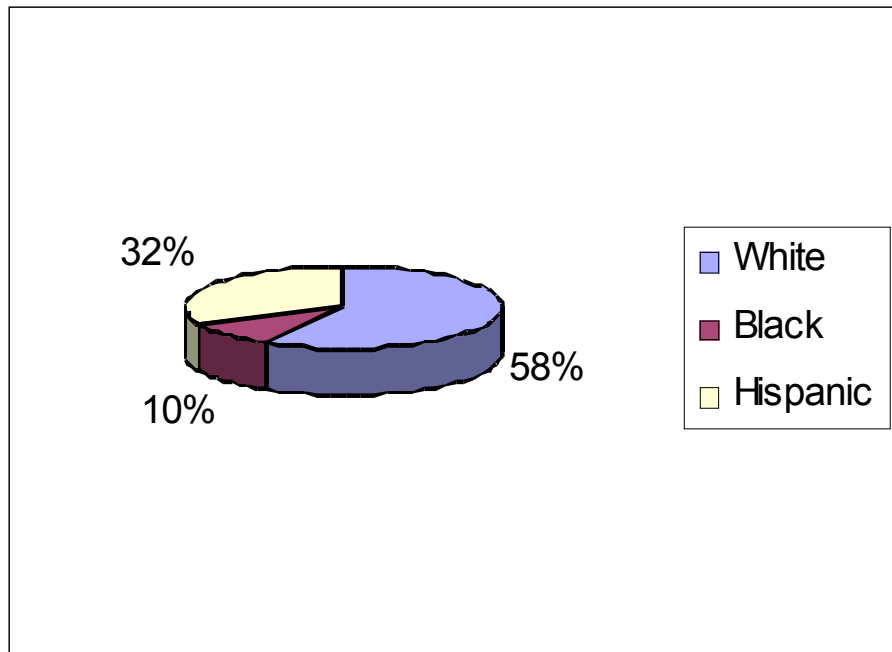
This comprehensive research base on effective schools is divided into three major areas: Leadership, climate and classroom instruction and management. Leadership is defined as “the role of the building principal is to focus the whole school on instruction and use this focus as a means of establishing and acting upon priorities in the school. The principal and all others in the school know the school is a place of learning,” (Druian et al., 1987, p. 2). Climate is identified as “All staff and all students share the expectation that all students can learn. Effective schools exhibit equity in terms of learning. Learning takes place in a safe, orderly environment, and students are expected to behave according to established, fairly executed rules of conduct,” (Druian et al., 1987, p. 2). Classroom instruction and management is described as “All teachers are highly skilled in and use a variety of instructional methods and techniques. There are clear instructional objectives, activities are tied to objectives, and there is frequent monitoring and evaluation of student progress toward those goals,” (Druian et al., 1987, p. 2).

Indeed successful programs for at-risk youth, such as the Richarte High School program showcased in this article, reflect the use of effective practice as outlined above. The principal and the faculty exhibit strong leadership which supports and demands effective instructional strategies and techniques; students acknowledge the existence of high expectations from the principal, teachers and support staff; small size of the school assures students they are receiving individual attention in connection with their academic achievement, and personal growth in terms of emotional and health-related support services; rules are explicit, equitably followed and consequences consistent.

Students have been empowered and for the first time in their high school careers, know where they stand academically and receive individualized assistance to meet their

educational goals. (Chart 2 is a composite of applicable statistics related to Richarte High Schools student population). Their Graduation Plan clearly defines their goals and states what the student must do to achieve the goal of graduation. Students realize their responsibility from the beginning of their experience at Richarte, i.e., they must apply in order to gain admittance to this school-of-choice. The large majority of students—97 percent--who leave Richarte High School leave with their goal accomplished—a high school diploma as they graduate from high school. (See Chart 4 for a breakdown of graduation percentages).

Richarte High School Enrollment for 2005-2006 by Race of Student Population



Percentage of Teen Parents 2005-2006

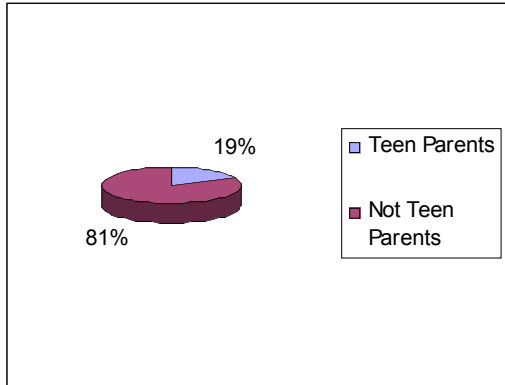


Chart 2.

Percentage of Economically Disadvantaged 2005-2006

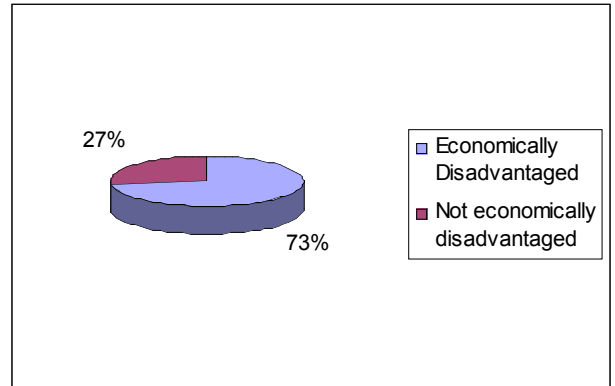


Chart 3.

Graduation Rate for Richarte High School – School Year 2004-2005

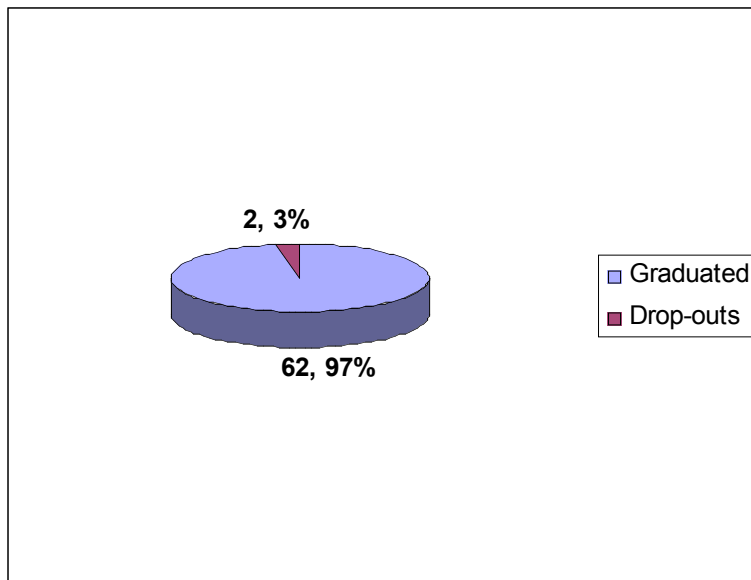


Chart 4.

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