



SREB

## Case Study

# WILLIAM CHARLES AKINS HIGH SCHOOL

*"We believe that through a learning climate characterized by high expectations, deeper understanding, complex thinking, an orderly environment and a commitment to caring and support for students and faculty, all students can succeed in high school and graduate ready for college, advanced training, careers and life."*

**Akins High School Belief Statement**

### The Setting

Akins High School (AHS) is the newest and second largest high school in the Austin Independent School District (AISD) in Austin, Texas. As the state capital, Austin serves a population of 1.4 million in a diverse, rapidly growing metropolitan area.

AHS opened in 2000 at a location outside the city, where it draws students from low-income neighborhoods as well as new subdivisions accompanying the rapid commercial and residential growth in south Austin. The enrollment exceeds 2,700 students in grades nine through 12.

In 2009-2010, the student population at AHS was 71 percent Hispanic, 15 percent white, 11 percent black, 2 percent Asian/Pacific Islander and less than 1 percent Native American students. (See Table 1.)

**Table 1:  
Student Demographics — Akins High School and Austin Independent School District,  
2009-2010 School Year**

	Akins High School	AISD
Hispanic	71%	59%
White	15	26
Black	11	11
Asian/Pacific Islander	2	4
Native American	<1	<1

Note: Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.

Source: Austin Independent School District

Approximately 14 percent of AHS students have Limited English Proficiency (LEP), and 14 percent are special needs students. More than 60 percent of students are economically disadvantaged. Many AHS students who attend college are the first in their families to take that step.

Southern  
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AHS Principal **Daniel Girard** said many people were surprised in 2010 when AHS joined other higher-ranking schools in the district — including schools with more students from higher socioeconomic levels — in achieving the Recognized accountability rating from the state. “People outside the school didn’t think it was possible, but our administrators, teachers and students knew we could do it,” Girard said.

The AHS school community is proud of the state honor. A group of students was photographed at the entrance to the school, holding the Recognized banner and standing beneath a large hand-lettered sign that proclaims, “Welcome to Akins — a Recognized Campus.”

AHS received national acclaim in 2009-2010 when *Newsweek* magazine placed it in the top 6 percent of high schools in the United States.

## Recognizing the Need to Prepare More Students for College and Careers

When the first students received diplomas from AHS in 2003, the class as a whole was academically undistinguished. Performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) in 2003 was significantly lower than district and state averages in all four content areas — English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. Less than half of AHS juniors passed the TAKS exams in English/language arts, mathematics and science.

Leadership was inconsistent, with three principals in the first seven years and high faculty turnover. By 2005, AHS had become a large impersonal high school with problems related to student attendance, behavior, lack of focus, insufficient achievement and low completion rates. Many students were unable to see a connection between high school and what they hoped to do in the future.

Basic courses did not always meet the needs of students or match their interests. Elective courses in art, music, journalism and computer applications were created with no career path in mind and taught in isolation from students’ other classes. Interdisciplinary lessons were difficult to impossible to plan, since students did not share core sets of teachers. **Thus, the content that students learned in one subject seldom linked to what they learned in others. Instead of beefing up instruction to prepare students for college and careers, AHS focused on helping students pass state graduation exams.**

In April 2004, an SREB Technical Assistance Visit (TAV)<sup>1</sup> team met with administrators, teachers and students and submitted a written report describing promising practices, challenges and recommendations for improvement at AHS. The purpose of the report was to help the school align the curriculum to standards, redesign courses to include a wide range of engaging activities, and ensure that assessments measured whether students were mastering content. The TAV team recommended a process to examine curricula, instructional plans, teacher assignments and student work.

The principal led a professional development session to help teachers understand how the recommendations in the TAV report were linked under the *HSTW* school improvement umbrella. However, the school continued to attempt to address too many initiatives at once.

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<sup>1</sup> For more than 20 years, SREB has refined a process that involves an external team of educators and community members conducting a review of school and classroom practices. The Technical Assistance Visit and follow-up report give school leaders a clear picture of the school’s progress in school reform and recommends strategies for moving forward to implement the *HSTW* Key Practices. The TAV team reviews school data; interviews leaders, teachers and students; and observes classroom instruction before providing a debriefing of its findings.

## Seeking Strategies for Whole-School Enrichment

Faced with numerous challenges as a new and socioeconomically diverse school, AHS proved to be the ideal setting to explore strategies for solving problems on campus and at other large urban high schools in the state and nation. In 2005, the Texas High School Project<sup>2</sup> chose AHS to receive a Smaller Learning Communities (SLCs) grant through the Communities Foundation of Texas. This major investment in AHS was an opportunity to make the changes necessary to position the school at the forefront of innovative school redesign by organizing into theme-based academies aimed at preparing all students for college and careers.

The Southern Regional Education Board (SREB) — chosen as the technical services provider for the grant — supported AHS with 40 days of school improvement coaching per year for four years. AHS school leaders and faculty readily accepted the Key Practices of SREB’s *High Schools That Work* (HSTW) design as the framework for school improvement and established three straightforward goals:

- Improve student achievement.
- Improve programs and services to students.
- Improve student preparation for college and careers.

SREB’s support began as soon as the grant was awarded. An AHS leadership team joined teams from five other HSTW schools in a Site Development Workshop (SDW) to instill the HSTW Key Practices for raising student achievement. Although the off-campus location made it impossible for every AHS teacher to participate in the workshop and to support the improvement effort from the beginning, leaders and teachers quickly gained understanding of HSTW and its guidelines for SLCs. Teachers became enthusiastic about the new design and exceeded expectations for creativity in helping implement the academies. “One strength of AHS during the first two years of the small learning communities grant was the willingness of the faculty to step out of the shadows of what they had been doing and try something new,” an HSTW school improvement consultant said.

## Redesigning the School into Small Learning Communities

AHS opened the 2006-2007 school year with a total reorganization based on the concept of SLCs called academies. **Instead of phasing-in the new design, AHS made it possible for every student to enroll in the academy of his or her choice from the beginning of the new design.** Teachers had been reassigned during the planning stages in the previous year and were ready to contribute to the design implementation.

Major activities in the first year included continuing to define the structure of each academy and making plans to add New Tech High School as another academy option. An HSTW school improvement consultant accompanied an AHS leadership team to California to observe New Tech schools and determine what was needed at AHS. The concept of New Tech High School combined project-based learning with technology for core academic courses.

“One strength of AHS during the first two years of the small learning communities grant was the willingness of the faculty to step out of the shadows of what they had been doing and try something new.”

HSTW School Improvement Consultant

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<sup>2</sup> The Texas High School Project is a joint public and private venture, involving the Texas Education Agency, the Office of the Governor, The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, and the Michael and Susan Dell Foundation in a collaboration to improve education in Texas. The Communities Foundation of Texas, an intermediary for the effort, chose the Southern Regional Education Board to work with high-minority urban schools across the state to implement the *High Schools That Work* school improvement design of Goals and Key Practices for raising academic and technical achievement and preparing students for college and careers.

The *HSTW* school improvement consultant helped AHS develop a leadership triad — an assistant principal, an academy coordinator and a guidance counselor with clearly defined roles and responsibilities — for each academy. (See Academy Leadership Triad Roles and Responsibilities.) The academy coordinators met regularly with the *HSTW* consultant for technical assistance/coaching on instructional leadership, problem solving, cooperative learning and project-based learning.

### **Academy Leadership Triad Roles and Responsibilities**

#### ***Academy Coordinator***

- Foster teamwork by building a community of learners.
- Generate momentum for change.
- Use data to guide change.
- Build and sustain the academy culture.
- Serve as a coach to strengthen teaching and learning.
- Coordinate professional development and other instructional support for teachers in the academy.
- Facilitate academy meetings.
- Schedule and plan parent meetings.
- Develop transition plans of action for eighth to ninth grade and for grade 12 and beyond.
- Monitor student attendance, discipline and failures. Discuss findings with teachers and plan interventions.
- Coordinate and facilitate work-based learning and other “beyond campus” experiences for students in the academy.
- Chair an academy advisory committee composed of business professionals, parents and teachers.
- Reflect on instructional practices and collaborate with staff on school improvement and student success.
- Complete all duties assigned by the principal.

#### ***Academy Counselor***

- Serve as a consultant to enrich the advisory program.
- Facilitate students’ schedules.

- Provide academy information on career pathways to teachers, students and parents.
- Build ties with the community.
- Implement a crisis intervention plan when necessary.
- Assist in intervention meetings with students and parents.
- Disseminate guidance resources to staff, students and parents.
- Complete all duties assigned by the principal.

#### ***Academy Counselor***

- Share information from the principal and the district.
- Model effective instruction to increase the rigor of integrated learning.
- Help the academy staff organize and plan the focus of projects.
- Serve on a team to hire academy staff.
- Discuss student attendance, discipline and failure rates with teachers.
- Provide effective practices as resources for intervention.
- Set academy expectations.
- Allow for recognition of successful students and staff.
- Develop academy goals based on school goals.
- Share data and help teachers develop action plans for addressing students’ weaknesses.
- Analyze results and refocus efforts as necessary.
- Complete all duties assigned by the principal.

Daniel Girard became the fourth principal of AHS at the beginning of 2007-2008. He previously was principal of an El Paso, Texas, high school that had been undergoing a successful redesign effort of its own. Girard was ready to make a difference at AHS.

A TAV team that visited AHS in September 2007 found that gaps in student achievement continued to exist. The team recommended that AHS leaders involve the faculty in developing a plan to close the gaps by addressing the challenges identified in the TAV report:

- Require all students to complete a rigorous program of study, including an academic core based on college- and career-readiness standards, plus a concentration or major.
- Strengthen the culture of high expectations for academic achievement and student behavior.
- Ask students to complete challenging assignments involving engaging, research-based instructional strategies.
- Develop a comprehensive guidance and advisement system.
- Expand communication and collaboration so that all stakeholders focus on implementing the *HSTW* design for school improvement.

AHS responded by creating a well-defined structure to guide and accelerate school improvement, including a campus leadership team that meets bi-weekly and participates in an annual retreat; task forces of teachers to address topics such as literacy, numeracy, grading, advisory services, school climate and discipline; and professional learning communities of teachers who meet weekly by department. Academy coordinators meet once a week. Faculty and staff maintain communication through an online wiki of information.

## Using the SLC Design to Improve School and Classroom Practices and Student Achievement

Small learning communities are called *academies* at AHS and may be referred to as *schools-within-a-school* in other educational settings. They give students confidence in smaller surroundings, personalized instruction by teams of teachers, and mentoring from adults who provide guidance to students in meeting education and career goals. AHS gave three primary reasons for embracing the SLC structure:

- To offer a more rigorous and relevant curriculum to prepare students for the 21st century
- To provide teacher advocates and mentors for students
- To increase successful collaboration among teachers from various disciplines

Students in grades nine through 12 enroll in one of six theme-based academies, where they complete a college-preparatory academic core and at least three credits in a major. Most majors consist of certified career/technical (CT) courses in an effort to provide graduates with either skill certification or college credit. For example, the pharmacy tech pathway allows a student to complete course work qualifying him or her to begin work as a pharmacy technician after graduation. Articulated course work such as Accounting I and II or an EMT certification class provides skills for employability after graduation. “This is the learn-to-earn model,” said T-STEM Academy Coordinator **Regina McGough**. “We want students to graduate with either a specific skill set or college credit hours.”

“Students drive the courses and the offerings. Teachers seek additional certifications when the need arises for a new course. The majors are not set in stone but are kept fluid so that students’ needs are always being met.”

Principal Daniel Girard

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) sequence of courses was the jumping-off point for career majors at AHS. The school combined data from student interest surveys with teacher certifications to design the majors. “Students drive the courses and the offerings,” Girard said. “Teachers seek additional certifications when the need arises for a new course. The majors are not set in stone but are kept fluid so that students’ needs are always being met.”

The original SLC design at AHS included a ninth-grade academy that grouped freshmen with the same teachers and counselors until they entered a theme-based academy for grades 10 through 12. AHS made the decision in 2010 to dissolve the ninth-grade academy, beginning with the 2010-2011 school year. Each middle grades student is required to select an academy before entering high school.

“We decided to close the freshman academy when we began to see increases in state assessment scores in the upper grades but not in grade nine,” Girard said. “Also, we felt that keeping freshmen together prolonged the transition into high school. They were not interacting with juniors and seniors and were still behaving as eighth-graders in many ways.”

To ease transition of eighth-graders into the academies, the AHS principal and assistant principals make presentations to middle grades leaders about opportunities available to students at the high school. Academy coordinators and counselors visit middle grades counselors and students. Eighth-graders complete assessments to determine their personal interests and attributes to aid in selecting an academy. The academies hold fairs at the high school to showcase what they can offer students.

Psychologist John Holland’s theory of “career choice” explores the role of personality types in selecting a career field. Holland lists six major personality types — and six major work environments — as follows: realistic, investigative, artistic, social, enterprising and conventional. AHS essentially taps into this theory by allowing students to select academies and majors that provide knowledge and experiences leading to success in fields that match their individual traits.

The academies are a work in progress. New ones are added and existing majors are created or expanded to meet the needs of students in the 21st century. In 2010-2011, the school offered almost 20 majors in six academies:

The academies are a work in progress. New ones are added and existing majors are created or expanded to meet the needs of students in the 21st century.

- **Arts and Humanities Academy (AHA)** — The majors available in this academy are art, digital media, print journalism, humanities and performing arts. Students who choose this academy read widely and express ideas, thoughts and feelings through painting, writing, music, drama and design. They strive to understand deeply, express creatively and live fully the “examined life.”
- **Agriculture, Computer and Engineering Sciences Academy (ACES)** — The majors are veterinary assistant, horticulture/floriculture, information tech/programming, computer tech support/network design/administration and environmental science, a new major becoming increasingly popular due to the “green” movement. Students in this academy call on scientific investigation and research to use, design and repair equipment and to work with animals and plants.
- **Academy of Business, Leadership and Legal Enterprises (ABLE)** — The majors are business, criminal justice and military leadership. Students prepare for careers involving persuasion, law enforcement, leadership, data management, accounting and business. This academy is for students who aspire to careers where they will keep things organized and running smoothly.
- **Social Service Academy (SSA)** — The majors are health science technology, ready-set-teach, social services, pre-med and language other than English. Students participate in hands-on experiences in leading, teaching, counseling, serving and helping others. They value service to others, fairness, understanding and empathy and are friendly, trusting, helpful, kind, generous and warm. They enjoy working with others and will sacrifice personally to forward group goals. Career fields include counselor, elementary school teacher, employee relations specialist, nurse, occupational therapist, personnel manager, police officer and political scientist.
- **New Tech High School (NTHS)** — Students in this academy learn in a different way as they experience high-tech, student-centered, project- and problem-based learning. Teachers assign projects that meet state standards by challenging students to address problems faced by real people in actual situations. They also integrate reading,

writing, mathematics and science into instruction. Students take all core courses, foreign language and technology classes in New Tech and select majors from any other academy. Using technology as a tool, students learn to be independent, creative and self-motivated while preparing for college and careers. New Tech High School opened in August 2006 and enrolled its first freshman class in 2010-2011.

- **T-STEM (Texas Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics) Academy** — This newest academy was built on the Project Lead The Way engineering major, which previously was offered in the ACES Academy. The Project Lead the Way major allows students to specialize in engineering but may expand in the future to include more academic majors. T-STEM focuses on improving instruction and academic performance in science- and mathematics-related subjects such as civil, mechanical and aeronautical engineering and increasing the number of students who study and enter STEM careers. Supported by the TEA, the academy includes learning labs to develop innovative ways to improve science and math instruction. AHS launched the T-STEM Academy at the beginning of 2010-2011 in a new science wing with six science classrooms.

The organization of students into SLCs created opportunities for AHS to advance student achievement and to help students pursue promising career paths, but it also created inconsistencies. “When I became principal in 2007, we had five academies with five grading plans, five advisory plans and five literacy plans,” Daniel Girard said. “The structural pieces were in place, but many details needed to be worked out. Many students, parents and teachers were confused. Disputes over vertical and horizontal boundaries between departments and academies occurred. The school suffered from seriously tangled webs.”

Girard and an *HSTW* school improvement consultant committed to work together to involve the entire faculty in solving the problems. To ensure a common vision, the principal and the consultant revisited each *HSTW* Key Practice, looking for evidence of implementation and opportunities to increase effectiveness. The consultant provided another set of eyes and hands to sort out things and to provide training and coaching for teachers in how to implement more successful instructional strategies.

The *HSTW* SLC rubric has served consistently and reliably to guide the principal and staff in developing high-implementation, high-success academies. AHS leaders and teachers use the rubric to measure the school’s progress and to develop plans for the future. The rubric enables AHS to track advances in four strands:

- Creating an effective structure
- Building a system of shared leadership
- Developing rigorous and relevant instructional practices
- Supporting students and teachers

The *HSTW* rubric lists actions to take in improving the SLCs, beginning with “no implementation or the planning stages” and continuing through low, moderate and high implementation.

After initial restructuring, AHS focused on increasing rigor in the classroom to raise academic learning, teaching in a block schedule, and preparing students with 21st-century knowledge and skills. The AHS academies have changed in a number of ways and continue to evolve as leaders, teachers and counselors work together to provide challenging academic studies and modern career pathway opportunities for students.

“The *HSTW* small learning communities rubric is the touchstone for everything we do in continuously improving the academies,” Girard said. “We use the rubric as a jumping-off point for professional development throughout the year.”

The major objectives and activities of AHS academies are aligned with the *HSTW* Key Practices:

### ***Ensure Effective Leadership and Communication***

The *HSTW* school improvement framework has guided AHS in creating an organizational structure to focus on continuous improvement. The leadership triad of each academy meets weekly. Academic core teachers have a common planning period. Meeting bi-weekly by discipline, teachers review the results of formative assessments based on Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and recommend tutoring for students who are weak in certain areas. All teachers in an academy meet at least monthly. The academy coordinator — with input from teacher leaders — creates a meeting agenda to facilitate learning and maintain structure. Each academy has a staffing committee to create the schedule for teachers and students of that academy.

### ***Connect the Academies to the School's Overall Goals***

Academies are aligned with the overall goal of the school to implement the *HSTW* Key Practices for raising achievement and preparing students for success. Each academy has an advisory committee of students, parents, teachers, employers and postsecondary representatives. One member of the advisory committee and one member of the leadership team meet with the campus advisory committee. Each academy supports shared leadership by maintaining a system of sub-committees, task forces and focus groups on topics deemed relevant for the school year.

Each summer, the Campus Leadership Team meets to outline the Campus Improvement Plan (CIP) and to develop goals for the coming year. (See “Ambitious and Attainable Goals” on page 18 for more information about the CIP.) Triad members from the academies review the CIP and determine the appropriate methods to meet the goals within each academy. Each academy is different; what works in one may not work in another. To support a literacy goal, for example, ACES developed a program known as ACES Reads. Students keep reading logs signed by parents or teachers and are eligible for incentives such as t-shirts. English/language arts teachers worked with the ACES triad to create academy-specific literacy goals that support overall campus goals.

### ***Maintain a Culture of High Expectations***

Each academy raises expectations by teaching to grade-level and college- and career-readiness standards. AHS is implementing the *HSTW* Key Practice for each student to complete an upgraded academic core and a concentration. The academic core consists of four courses each in English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. Students complete concentrations or majors in their theme-based academies. The number of credits required for graduation at AHS increased from 24 in 2007-2008 to 26 in 2010-2011.

Each academy has a signature culture or identity that encourages students to do their best work. For example, students in SSA take pride in performing community services throughout the year. ABLE students exhibit dependability and other characteristics of future business leaders by attending class regularly, being on time and dressing appropriately. Students in the other academies immerse themselves in their majors and proudly represent their academies on campus and in the community.

Thirty-eight percent of AHS students participating in the 2010 *HSTW* Assessment<sup>3</sup> reported an intensive emphasis on high expectations. This percentage was almost double the 2008 percentage of 20 percent.

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<sup>3</sup> The *HSTW* Assessment is given to all or a random sample of 12th-grade students at *HSTW* sites. The Assessment's five components — subject tests in reading, mathematics and science; a student survey; and a teacher survey — allow SREB to disaggregate student achievement data by students' and teachers' perceptions of school and classroom practices.

## Improve the Quality of Curriculum, Instruction and Assessment

AHS uses a research-based framework based on the *HSTW* Key Practices to raise student achievement. The framework also incorporates the nine Principles of Learning from the Institute for Learning at the University of Pittsburgh, the Standards in Practice (SIP) process developed by The Education Trust, and the 10 Features of Good Small Schools from the School Redesign Network at Stanford University.

### *HSTW* Key Practices for Improving Student Achievement

*HSTW* has identified the following Key Practices to boost student achievement and provide direction and meaning to comprehensive school improvement and student learning:

- **High expectations** — Motivate more students to meet high expectations by integrating high expectations into classroom practices and giving students frequent feedback.
- **Program of study** — Require each student to complete an upgraded academic core and an academic or career concentration.
- **Academic studies** — Teach more students the essential concepts of the college-preparatory curriculum by encouraging them to apply academic content and skills to real-world problems and projects.
- **Career/technical studies** — Provide more students with access to intellectually challenging career/technical studies in high-demand fields that emphasize the higher-level mathematics, science, literacy and problem-solving skills needed in the workplace and in further education.
- **Work-based learning** — Enable students and their parents to choose from programs that integrate challenging high school studies and work-based learning and are planned by educators, employers and students.
- **Teachers working together** — Provide cross-disciplinary teams of teachers with time and support to work together to help students succeed in challenging academic and career/technical studies. Integrate reading, writing and speaking as strategies for learning into all parts of the curriculum and integrate mathematics into science and career/technical classrooms.
- **Students actively engaged** — Engage students in academic and career/technical classrooms in rigorous and challenging Proficient-level assignments, using research-based instructional strategies and technology.
- **Guidance** — Involve students and their parents in a guidance and advisement system that develops positive relationships and ensures completion of an accelerated program of study with an academic or a career/technical concentration. Provide each student with the same mentor throughout high school to assist with understanding postsecondary options, setting goals, selecting courses, reviewing the student's progress and suggesting appropriate interventions as necessary.
- **Extra help** — Provide a structured system of extra help to assist students in completing accelerated programs of study with high-level academic and technical content.
- **Culture of continuous improvement** — Use student assessment and program evaluation data to continuously improve school culture, organization, management, curriculum and instruction to advance student learning.

In 2007, AHS converted to an A-B block schedule consisting of eight 90-minute classes. Students attend four classes on an A day and four classes on a B day. These longer periods of time are ideal for teachers to involve students in completing engaging, high-level projects.

The block schedule has helped make it possible for AHS to offer 20 Advanced Placement (AP) courses and to involve more students in completing the courses and taking the AP tests. The AP courses offered in 2010-2011 include Macro Economics, Government, U.S. History, Psychology, Physics B, Physics C (both parts), Biology, Calculus (AB and BC), Computer Science, Statistics, Spanish 4 and 5, English 3 and 4, Art Studio, French 4, Art History, Statistics and Environmental Science.

Dual enrollment (early college) enables students to complete college-level courses while attending high school. This incentive encourages students to make the effort necessary to earn a high school diploma and to continue with further education and training in the future.

After AHS reorganized into SLCs, it moved quickly to increase the rigor of classroom assignments. Teachers agreed to define rigor to mean that students are challenged to understand and work with difficult concepts. Assignments require students to make their own discoveries and to expand their understanding of the modern world. Utilizing backwards design, teachers create rigorous and relevant lessons that align with state standards and the curriculum map.

The academy structure and the *HSTW* emphasis on authentic learning compelled AHS teachers to develop and assign more real-world projects and problems that require students to use higher-order thinking, consider alternatives, communicate extensively and demonstrate learning in their academic studies. Academies have increased the number of projects by using the *HSTW* Project-Based Learning Quality Indicators:

- Authenticity
- Academic rigor
- Applied learning
- Active exploration
- Adult connections and relationships
- Assessment practices and alignment

The administration keeps a watchful eye on academic rigor. Each Monday the principal meets with an administrative team to examine classroom assessments. “If the tests are rigorous and aligned with standards, the teachers move forward with them,” Girard said. “If not, the department unpacks the standards and rewrites the tests.” The school leadership team looks at the standards and assessments in a meeting every Thursday. “As a result of the campus-wide focus on assessments, the AHS teachers are much more cognizant that assessments should reflect appropriate rigor,” Girard said.

The principal asked an *HSTW* school improvement consultant to conduct “rigor checks” in each academy. The consultant visited classrooms to determine the content of lessons and shared findings and effective strategies with school leaders and teachers. Later, teachers made the walkthrough visits and discussed the lessons with their colleagues.

Girard and his staff use a systematic approach to improve curriculum, instruction and assessment. “We write down all of the standards to make sure we are testing the appropriate ones,” he said. “We cover certain things in certain classes. As a result, we know exactly how a student is likely to perform on state and school assessments.”

### ***Provide Intellectually Challenging CT Studies***

By offering CT courses with a strong academic base and many opportunities for students to learn through hands-on projects and problems, AHS supports students in the journey toward college and career success. The career-themed majors in each academy allow AHS students to acquire high-level academic and career knowledge and skills that are compatible with the 21st-century economy. CT teachers understand the requirements of business and industry and are dedicated to preparing students to be productive participants in their chosen careers.

Before school redesign, AHS students took CT courses but failed to earn industry certifications. They either were not encouraged to take a sequence of courses or did not have access to higher-level courses. The academy structure with career majors has enabled students to select more concentrations leading to more certifications. The certifications offered in 2010-2011 reflect a wide spectrum of careers:

- Certified Pharmacy Technician
- Certified Nursing Assistant
- Certified Emergency Medical Technician
- Certified Educational Aide
- Child Development Associate Certification
- Office Proficiency Assessment Certification
- Bookkeeping Fundamentals Certification
- Certified Veterinary Technician
- High School Floral Certification
- Texas Master Gardener Certification
- Texas Certified Nursery Professional
- Certified Computer Service Technician
- Certified Network Computer Technician

Each academy has a goal to offer a certification for every major and to increase the numbers of students earning certifications. Realizing that employers increasingly look for a “stamp of approval” that graduates can perform at a higher level, academy leaders and teachers constantly revisit the majors to make additions and modifications in career pathways leading to certification. Teachers encourage students to take certification tests to meet industry standards and to ensure better job opportunities in the future.

Between 2008 and 2010, the percentage of AHS students reporting an intensive emphasis on quality CT courses grew 40 percentage points — from 16 percent to 56 percent — on the *HSTW* Assessment.

### ***Make It Possible for Teachers to Work Together***

Students benefit when their academic and CT teachers plan and work together to make learning relevant to students’ lives. *HSTW* school improvement consultants facilitated a professional development workshop for teams of academic and CT teachers from each academy. Teachers learned how to create interdisciplinary projects and how to replicate the professional development with other academy teachers.

AHS teachers have multiple opportunities during the year to learn and share strategies for integrating academic and career studies. The district’s “late start” policy for professional development allows teachers to meet two hours twice a month before students arrive at school. CT and core academic teachers use the time to plan projects and thematic units to implement in the academies. Integrated learning is the topic of one week of professional development at the beginning of the school year and of professional development days five times during the year. The school encourages and supports teachers wanting to meet outside the professional development schedule to explore ideas for collaborative assignments.

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Integrated projects have been successful in drawing on students’ natural interests to increase their knowledge and skills:

- Students in business and English/language arts classes in the Academy of Business and Legal Enterprises wrote a proposal for funding to establish an on-site coffee shop that they operate from 8:15 a.m. to 9 a.m. Monday through Friday.
- English and world history students in the Social Services Academy completed a 12-week unit on the Holocaust. By examining the social and political issues of the topic, they were able to connect it to current events.

The percentage of AHS students reporting intensive experiences in integrating reading and mathematics into CT studies increased between 2008 and 2010. The *HSTW* Assessment showed large increases — from 8 percent in 2008 to 56 percent in 2010 — in both reading and math integration.

### ***Promote Literacy Schoolwide***

The AHS principal is a strong advocate of reading and writing for learning in every classroom. AHS adopted the *HSTW* literacy goals for students to read the equivalent of 25 books per year across the curriculum. The goals also include writing weekly in all classes, using reading and writing strategies to enhance learning in all classes, writing research papers in all classes, and completing a rigorous language arts curriculum taught like college-prep/honors English. Students participate in daily silent sustained reading called Akins Reads. Faculty members give incentives to students who are “caught reading.” Teachers use the Scholastic Reading Inventory to test students’ reading levels so that the school can assess literacy growth.

The percentage of AHS students reporting an intensive emphasis on literacy across the curriculum increased nine percentage points — from 29 percent to 38 percent — between the 2008 and 2010 *HSTW* Assessments. Larger percentages of students in 2010 than in 2008 reported that they completed short writing assignments of one to three pages for which they received grades in English/language arts and science at least monthly. More students also reported that they discussed or debated topics with other students about what they read in English classes at least monthly and that they made oral presentations to the class on projects or assignments at least once a semester.

### ***Offer Work-Based Learning Experiences***

AHS seniors can choose internships and/or externships to connect what they are learning in the academies with what they can expect to find in the workplace and the community after graduation. Internships are available for students who find it hard to travel off-campus for lack of a vehicle or a driver’s license. These students sign up for in-school activities that match their career aspirations. For example, students from the Arts and Humanities Academy work as production assistants for the campus theater technician. Assignments range from developing a dance routine to handling a business detail such as estimating the cost of hiring personnel for a large school event. Other students serving internships on campus recruit and schedule members of school organizations such as the National Honor Society to mentor other students.

Students able to travel away from school participate in externships. While studying performing arts in the Arts and Humanities Academy, students work with the Austin Film Festival to shadow a director or to help raise funds. Students majoring in criminal justice in the Academy of Business, Leadership and Legal Enterprises receive on-the-job experience with local law enforcement agencies.

A successful externship with the City of Austin resulted in a new government course for 25 students from across the academies. Students work in various departments, such as waste management and homeland security. At the request of the mayor’s office, one AHS student served as a youth advocate for the city. Students in the government class create products connected with their work, report on the duties they performed, and receive grades on their projects. “City government officials are very impressed by our students,” said Regina McGough, who coordinated the internship and externship programs in 2009-2010.

### ***Provide Extra Help to Support Student Achievement***

Each academy implements a plan for extra help and credit recovery to support students in meeting higher academic and technical standards. Homework Haven is scheduled from 4:30 p.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Friday, when science and mathematics teachers are available in the library to help students overcome deficiencies in those two subjects. Students are not required to attend, but teachers recommend the sessions highly and the turnout is good.

Students have another opportunity to improve math and science skills during Saturday School from 9 a.m. to noon each week. Two math and two science teachers tutor students who have had attendance problems or just want to improve their knowledge and skills. Every academy sponsors a review day prior to the TAKS tests. These days are tailored to the needs of students in each academy and may range from one or two Saturdays to eight mini-sessions focusing on English/language arts, math and science.

Struggling students are placed in remedial classes and some students are enrolled in AVID (Advancement Via Individual Determination), an in-school academic support system. “We can’t force tutoring, but we can decide students’ schedules during school hours,” Girard said.

Thirty-eight percent of AHS students in 2010, compared with 22 percent in 2008, reported on the *HSTW* Assessment that they experienced an intensive emphasis on extra help.

### ***Establish a Guidance and Advisement System***

In the school’s early years, AHS students received limited one-on-one support for education and career preparation. Little effort was made to involve parents in helping students plan for further education and careers. Now, each academy operates an advisory system that includes regular meetings, an advisory curriculum and a teacher-adviser for every student. Students are sorted by academy and grade level and assigned alphabetically to an advisory group of 15 students led by a teacher who remains with the students throughout four years of high school. Each group meets for 30 minutes twice a week. The advisers keep student portfolios containing grades, evidence of achievement and helpful information on calculating GPAs and applying to colleges and universities. Teachers develop relationships in which they support the academic achievement and goal-setting of their advisees. They learn students’ strengths and weaknesses and direct students to extra help from adults in the building as needed. The advisory slogan at AHS is “On your case and on your side” as teacher-advisers nurture and support their assigned students’ journey toward graduation.

The AHS advisory curriculum was designed to help students make the transition to high school; plan a program of study for careers and advanced studies; develop habits of success for school and life; prepare for the PSAT, SAT and ACT exams; and apply to colleges and jobs. Teachers participate in professional development to explore their roles and responsibilities as advisers and to learn how to deliver the advisory curriculum.

An advisory team rewrites the advisory curriculum as necessary to meet students’ needs. Assistant principals in the academies serve as advisory monitors to confirm that lessons are being delivered appropriately in the guidance groups and that students are benefitting from the advisory services.

AHS academies have common advisory periods, making it easier for school leaders to recognize and celebrate student achievement. The school gives prizes such as hats, buttons and t-shirts to generate healthy competition among the academies.

The percentage of AHS students reporting that they had intensive guidance and advisement services almost doubled between the 2008 and 2010 *HSTW* Assessments — from 31 percent in 2008 to 59 percent in 2010.

### ***Involve Parents, Community Members, Employers and Postsecondary Educators in Improving the School***

Membership in the Parent Teacher Student Association (PTSA) is growing steadily as AHS parents increasingly become involved with a Recognized school that is raising achievement and preparing students for success. The school hosts parent nights to share information on curriculum and instruction and to involve parents in helping their children complete rigorous programs of study. Parent conference days are scheduled twice a year to support struggling students. Each academy creates and implements a parent engagement plan.

Business, community and postsecondary education input is available to AHS students. Academy leaders and teachers invite employers, postsecondary representatives and community leaders to visit the school when classroom topics or advisory sessions call for their expertise.

The school’s internship and externship work-based learning programs have been the impetus to connect all AHS students to worksite realities and experiences throughout the year. “Our career/tech teachers do a lot of networking to get business and industry leaders to come to the school as guest speakers and to create opportunities for students to gain valuable workplace experiences,” McGough said.

## Results of Efforts to Improve Student Achievement at AHS

Redesign and improvement efforts at AHS are paying off in terms of higher achievement and success for all groups of students. For the first time in the school's history, AHS received a Recognized accountability rating (based on student achievement) from the TEA in 2010. The school had been ranked Acceptable in 2007, 2008 and 2009. AHS is one of only four high schools in the district to receive the Recognized designation in 2010.

AHS received a Gold Performance Acknowledgement (GPA) in Comparable Improvement: Mathematics from the TEA in both 2006 and 2009. To earn the award, a school must receive a state accountability rating of Academically Acceptable or higher and meet criteria for one or more indicators. The award means that AHS was in the top 25 percent of the 40 most similar schools in the state in growth in mathematics achievement.

### *AHS Students Achieving at Higher Levels*

AISD does not require students to take the SAT college entrance exam, but the AHS advisory program and the school's college and career center encourages students to do so. The number taking the SAT at AHS grew from 179 students in 2005 to 266 students in 2010.

Two indicators of a challenging high school environment are the number of students taking Advanced Placement (AP) courses and the number taking dual enrollment courses for high school and college credits.

- The number of AP exams taken by AHS students almost doubled between 2006 and 2010 — from 369 exams in 2005-2006 to 713 exams in 2009-2010. “Twenty-five percent more students are taking almost twice as many exams,” Girard said. The percentages of students passing AP exams increased from 32 percent in 2005 to 36 percent in 2010.
- More AHS students are taking dual enrollment classes in conjunction with Austin Community College. The total has grown almost six-fold — from 53 students in 2005-2006 to 291 students in 2009-2010. “We want as many students as possible to complete college courses while in high school,” Girard said.

Huge gains have occurred at AHS in the percentages of all students passing the TAKS tests in English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies. The percentage-point increases for all students between 2005 and 2010 are 15 points in English/language arts, 37 points in mathematics, 33 points in science and 17 points in social studies. (See Tables 2 through 5.)

**Table 2:  
AHS Students Meeting TAKS English/Language Arts Standard, 2005 to 2010**

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
<b>All Students</b>	79%	81%	81%	79%	94%	94%
<b>Black</b>	73	83	78	79	93	93
<b>Hispanic</b>	75	76	78	76	94	93
<b>White</b>	90	92	92	89	97	97
<b>Economically Disadvantaged</b>	72	74	76	75	93	93

Source: Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System

**Table 3:  
AHS Students Meeting TAKS Mathematics Standard, 2005 to 2010**

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
All Students	47%	51%	54%	54%	79%	84%
Black	36	43	42	47	71	81
Hispanic	41	44	50	50	77	83
White	65	75	70	71	90	94
Economically Disadvantaged	39	44	48	47	76	82

Source: Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System

**Table 4:  
AHS Students Meeting TAKS Science Standard, 2005 to 2010**

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
All Students	52%	52%	51%	63%	77%	85%
Black	38	51	36	54	67	82
Hispanic	43	44	43	57	74	83
White	81	76	78	83	92	94
Economically Disadvantaged	39	42	40	58	72	82

Source: Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System

**Table 5:  
AHS Students Meeting TAKS Social Studies Standard, 2005 to 2010**

	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
All Students	81%	79%	83%	88%	97%	98%
Black	81	82	74	88	94	95
Hispanic	77	73	79	85	96	98
White	91	93	94	95	100	99
Economically Disadvantaged	75	72	77	84	96	98

Source: Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System

School leaders give several reasons for the surge in TAKS scores at AHS:

- Teachers have improved instruction to reduce the need for remediation.
- Students’ academic needs are identified and “prescriptions” are written to address students’ weak areas through tutoring and other support.
- Every student in the math and science departments takes a benchmark assessment at the beginning and middle of the year before taking the TAKS. Teachers use the data to build students’ knowledge and skills for the spring TAKS.

“We’ve had huge gains in getting students across the stage at graduation; our next focus is to have more students reaching the Commended level.”

AHS also focuses on raising TAKS achievement among minority students to close achievement gaps between student groups. Five college students from the Texas Campus Compact and Students in Service volunteer to help tutor AHS students. In addition, the school uses “pullout” instruction and “prescription” data to support students.

The percentage of Commended students — those performing considerably above the state passing standard on the TAKS — increased in English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies between 2005 and 2010. (See Table 6.) The Commended level is the highest available for students on the TAKS. Commended students show thorough understanding of the knowledge and skills at the grade level tested.

Table 6: AHS Students at the Commended Level on the TAKS, 2005 – 2010						
	2005	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010
English/Language Arts	9%	14%	13%	15%	15%	16%
Mathematics	6	8	9	12	13	13
Science	4	5	5	6	8	11
Social Studies	18	20	29	26	33	37

Source: Akins High School

“Our students are passing the state tests, but they need to score at higher levels,” Girard said. “We’ve had huge gains in getting students across the stage at graduation; our next focus is to have more students reaching the Commended level.”

Girard has asked academy leaders — coordinators, counselors and assistant principals — to become advocates for 50 students performing just shy of the Commended level. The leaders receive a list of students who need enrichment and tutoring to reach Commended.

### **Increased Scores on the HSTW Assessment**

AHS seniors participating in the *HSTW* Assessment showed substantial gains in completing the *HSTW*-recommended curriculum and meeting college- and career-readiness goals between 2008 and 2010. (See Table 7.)

**With its substantial gains in student achievement, AHS is proving that the academy structure has created a path to success for more students.** Redesign is exciting as students excel in a new environment. It is also gratifying for teachers to collaborate with new partners as they examine the curriculum and search for overlap and reinforcement in their teaching strategies. Redesign calls for all professionals to communicate, listen, learn and adjust. The level of involvement requires much more than closing the classroom door and teaching solo. Leaders are challenged to support teachers at many different levels of comfort by content area, department, grade level and academy.

**Table 7:  
Improved Achievement and Course-Taking Patterns of AHS Students  
on the *HSTW* Assessment, 2008 to 2010**

	2008	2010
<b>Completing the <i>HSTW</i>-Recommended Curriculum</b>		
4 College-Prep English Courses	39%	48%
4 Mathematics Courses (Algebra I and higher)	40	79
3 College-Prep Science Courses	43	90
<b>Meeting the College- and Career-Readiness Goals</b>		
Reading	43%	79%
Mathematics	42	55
Science	49	72
<b>Mean Scores</b>		
Reading (Goal: 250)	239	271
Mathematics (Goal: 257)	235	253
Science (Goal: 258)	245	271

Source: 2008 and 2010 *HSTW* Assessments

### ***Gains in Attendance and Discipline***

Students who are working toward a future goal and have someone at the school to turn to for guidance and mentoring are likelier to attend school on a regular basis. Attendance among all AHS students increased during the past three years, reaching more than 90 percent in 2009-2010. Attendance for the first six weeks of 2010-2011 rose almost 93 percent.

The effort to focus AHS students on high school graduation and a lifetime of success has resulted in improvements in student behavior. Between 2006-2007 and 2008-2009, the school experienced decreases of 63 percent in assaults on students and 31 percent in fighting. Students under the influence of alcohol and drugs declined 54 percent, while students possessing alcohol and drugs decreased 59 percent in that three-year period.

### **A New Challenge: Ratcheting Up Graduation Requirements**

AHS implemented the new Texas graduation requirements in 2010 as the school intensified efforts to prepare students for college, an associate's degree and advanced training. Specifically, AHS increased the number of required credits in mathematics and science from at least three credits to at least four credits in each subject. Texas calls the approach the 4x4 plan.

The environment was right for AHS to raise graduation requirements. The academy structure and the block schedule made it possible for students to take eight rather than seven subjects. "These conditions allowed AHS to move faster than other schools to increase the number of credits required for graduation," Girard said.

As of 2010, students must pass their classes as well as all four sections of the exit-level TAKS to receive a diploma and graduate from a Texas public high school. Texas offers three types of diploma plans for high school students — distinguished, recommended and minimum. All students entering AHS go on the recommended plan — a 4x4 program including four years each in English, math, science and social studies. They are also required to take electives such as fine arts and communication applications. Students working toward the distinguished diploma complete additional AP and dual credit coursework, and PSAT scores are also factored in.

The preliminary completion rates for all students in the AHS Class of 2010 showed a 6 percentage point increase over the Class of 2008. The rates for Hispanic students and black students both increased between 2008 and 2009, while the completion rate for white students declined 3 percentage points. (See Table 8.)

	Class of 2008	Class of 2009	Class of 2010	Percentage-Point Change
<b>All Students</b>	84%	87%	90%	+6
<b>Black</b>	81	85	88	+7
<b>Hispanic</b>	82	85	91	+9
<b>White</b>	91	94	88	-3
<b>Economically Disadvantaged</b>	77	88	86	+9

Note: The Class of 2010 rates are preliminary. Percentages have been rounded to the nearest whole number.  
Source: Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System

AHS focuses on having students complete high school within four years of entering. “We offer recovery coursework, a Delta Education science lab and a dropout prevention specialist to help students graduate on time,” Girard said. “We also recover students who may not have completed a degree program on time by enrolling them in concurrent dual credit courses to help them begin their college careers as they complete required courses or assessments.”

A parent support specialist works with administrators each fall to assist students who may be potential dropouts. The prevention strategy includes home visits to address truancy and other issues that may be of concern to students. “Our goal is for all students to complete high school with their cohorts,” Girard said. The state of Texas considers students on time if they graduate with the cohort they represented when they entered high school.

## **Ambitious and Attainable Goals for the Future**

As a school that has been successful with redesign, AHS hosts frequent visits by educators and others from throughout the state and the nation wanting to see how school reorganization can help prepare students for success. Visitors find AHS students focused and driven to achieve. Students know where they are and what they need to do to reach their goals. Through the academy structure, every student has an on-campus advocate to monitor grades and attendance and to provide academic, social and emotional support.

At the end of school each summer, the AHS principal and his leadership team meet to reflect on the past year and to begin developing a Campus Improvement Plan (CIP) for the coming year. Academy coordinators, department chairs, assistant principals and other specialists meet in groups to discuss the content before joining the principal at a three-day leadership retreat to complete the CIP plan.

AHS is working toward five major CIP goals:

- Increase the amount and types of support provided to English-language learners and special education students.
- Increase the level of classroom rigor so that more students — a minimum of 15 percent in each content area — will perform at the Commended level on the state assessment of English, math, science and social studies.
- Have 55 percent of students achieve the Higher Education Readiness Component (HERC) standard by the end of 2010-2011.
- Integrate 21st-century skills across the curriculum.
- Identify students who need interventions for grades, TAKS tests, extra help, student support, attendance and behavior early in the year and continue to identify and provide interventions on a consistent and anticipatory basis throughout the year.

“As we work to prepare students for college and careers, we promote social justice and professionalism in all courses.”

Principal Daniel Girard

“As we work to prepare students for college and careers, we promote social justice and professionalism in all courses,” Girard said. “We use 21st-century skills as a standard for measuring student success. Part of the Campus Improvement Plan each year is to reflect on the current social and professional skills of our students and to plan how to strengthen them in the future.”

AHS is justifiably proud of its accomplishments. Graduation requirements are aligned with rigorous state requirements that students earn four credits in each of the four core courses — English/language arts, mathematics, science and social studies — plus a major of at least three courses in a coherent sequence in a career-themed academy. Increasing numbers of students are earning certifications and college credits that place them ahead of the game in college and career readiness.

After moving systematically to redesign the school into SLCs, the next step is to apply the same type of organization and resolve in raising students and the school to a higher level. The AHS goal is to reach the Exemplary level — the level above Recognized and the highest level of state accountability. “Exemplary is not just a label. It means that more students are learning and preparing for success.”

Leaders at AHS will continue to keep standards front and center with teachers and students in supporting the belief that students can learn at a much higher level if they are engaged in challenging and meaningful studies and receive support to reach their goals.

“If students work hard and we work hard along with them, they can achieve, regardless of socioeconomic background,” Girard said.

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