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Implementation of the A–G Initiative in Year 1

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Summary

The study of the LAUSD A–G Initiative during the first year of implementation found that the central and local districts adhered to the professional development (PD) materials and protocols as they were designed, yet numerous factors muted any potential school-level impact of the specific initiative components. In general, the following findings emerged:

- Students wanted to succeed academically but many fell behind within the first year of high school.
- PD meetings exposed participants to materials and ideas but did not engage them in reflective discussions about their practice.
- Rather than focus on one coherent initiative, district and school staff were asked to respond to multiple demands on their time and energy.
- Across levels of the organization, particularly among school counselors, staff worked in isolation.

The purpose of the study was not to determine whether the A–G Initiative achieved its ultimate objectives, but to establish a baseline of current educational conditions in LAUSD secondary schools and describe implementation of the initiative within the first year. No single policy or program will result in the systematic change required to ensure all students graduate college-ready. Because of the complexity in establishing, not to mention implementing such overarching and challenging system improvements, it may be necessary to balance expectations for graduation requirements with realistic assessments of the efforts it will take to prepare our students to meet them.

Overview

In June 2005, about one in five LAUSD 12th grade students passed all the high school courses necessary for entrance to a California State University (CSU) or University of California (UC) institution (a 15-unit pattern of courses known as A–G). That same month, the LAUSD Board of Education approved a resolution stating that all students entering the 9th grade in 2012, will be required to complete the A–G course sequence in order to graduate from high school. In response, the LAUSD Division of Instruction developed the A–G Initiative as part of its overall efforts to reform secondary education.

Research and Evaluation conducted a study of the District's efforts during the first year of implementing the A–G Initiative. This research brief provides a general overview of the findings from that study.

Methods

While the A–G requirements cover five content areas, the study focused on implementation of the main components of the A–G Initiative the Division of Instruction introduced district-wide in 2006–07:

- New PD model and content in secondary mathematics (particularly 8th grade) and ELA (particularly 7th grade)
- New PD model and content for secondary counselors

Additionally, the study investigated issues relevant to the long-term success of the A–G Initiative, such as the guidance and information provided to students by counselors, and various contextual and attitudinal factors that influence the progress of students in secondary school.

To describe the implementation efforts around the main A–G Initiative, components data were gathered at the central district, across all local districts, and in a representative sample of 24 schools—16 middle and 8 senior high schools—between July 2006 and June 2007. Multiple methods and data sources were used to develop as detailed and accurate a picture of A–G implementation as possible during the school year. The methods employed included direct observations, interviews, surveys, case study analysis, and administrative data analysis.

Key Findings

Students want to succeed in school but within one year of high school most are at risk of not meeting the A–G requirements.

The A–G Resolution poses as serious dilemma for LAUSD staff and students. With the current school climate and instructional quality a significant proportion of students entering high school in 2012 will not be eligible for college and may not meet the new graduation requirements. About three-fourths of surveyed students said they want to pursue a post-secondary degree and most felt their school expected them to achieve academically. However, only about a third of students complete their first year of high school with a C or better in Algebra 1 and English 9.

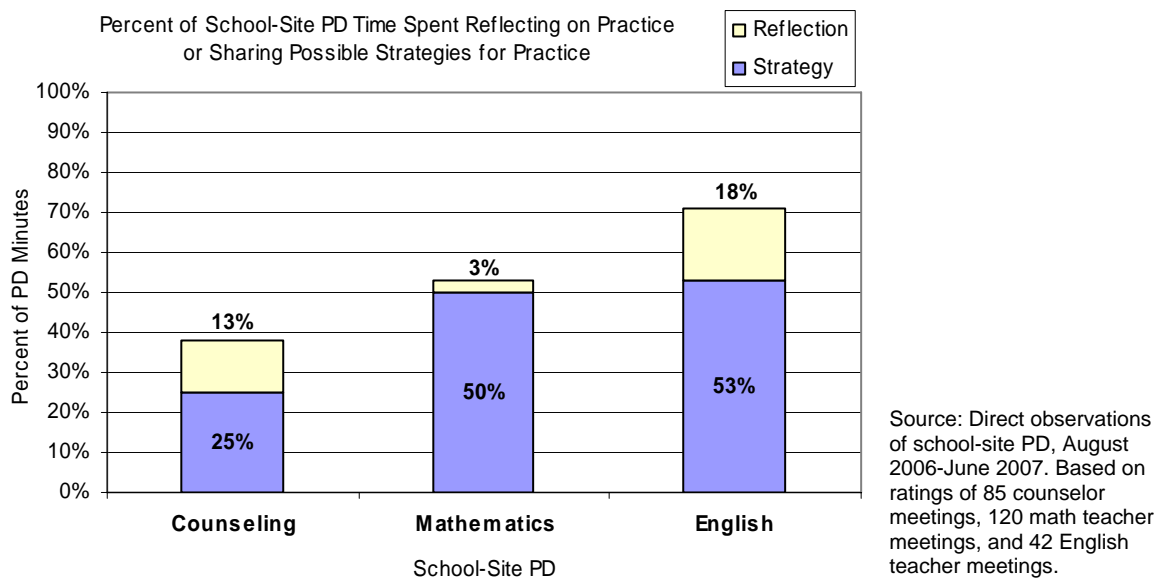
The typical secondary student experience included the following three challenges:

- Limited connection with school counselors.
- Lack of collective efficacy among school staff to support students.
- Limited exposure to high quality instruction in mathematics and English.

Professional Development exposed teachers and counselors to the A-G Initiative content and materials but did not engage them in reflective discussions about practice.

While the central and local districts adhered to the PD materials and protocols as they were designed, administrators and teachers rarely engaged in meaningful discussion about the new materials and ideas the A-G Initiative proposed. In both district and school-site PD, most of the dialogue involved the logistics and general strategies related to the A-G Initiatives, but relatively little time was allowed for participants to reflect on their own practice and how these new strategies and ideas could improve their work. Figure 1 exemplifies the amount of time counselors, math teachers, and English teachers spent reflecting on their practice during school-site PD.

Figure 1: Relatively little PD time spent reflecting on practice



District and school staff had to respond to multiple demands instead of focus on one coherent A-G initiative.

Rather than being allowed to focus on one coherent initiative and to carry out its associated set of responsibilities, district staff were asked to respond to multiple demands on their time and energy. It is unreasonable to expect the deep and time-intensive conversations and relationship building required to promote professional learning communities among overburdened individuals.

There was an initial attempt to unify central instructional initiatives under a framework for delivering PD, however, the model was by and large abandoned after the beginning of the year. In effect, there were no expectations or accountabilities of instructional leaders at any level of the organization to ensure a collective focus on the problem of A-G. Similarly,

no system-wide expectations existed for teachers and counselors to work collaboratively and communicate in ways that foster improvement in student services and instruction.

Students experienced limited exposure to the main components of the A–G Initiative in the first year.

Ultimately, the main components of the A–G Initiative did not result in substantial changes in counselor or teacher practice during the first year of implementation. Three of the primary components are highlighted below:

- Counselors used the IGP/ICP in a reactive, compliance-focused way instead of as a tool for orienting students to future academic achievement.
- Mathematics teachers used the instructional guide to plan lessons but had limited use of concept lessons and student collaborative work.
- In Algebra Readiness, most teachers did not provide students with the recommended hours of computer time or student collaborative work.
- In English 7 classrooms, most teachers did not use the designed 7th grade lessons consistently.

Conclusion

As this study documents, implementation of the A–G Initiative exposed administrators, counselors, and teachers to some of the changes in practice necessary to prepare schools for 2012 and beyond. Within the first year, however, breakdowns in the implementation process limited the potential impact of these changes on counseling and instructional practice.

The following recommendations stem from the Year 1 analysis:

- Central and local district leaders should work together to align and prioritize district initiatives under a common framework of goals for systemic change.
- Central and local district staff should work together to design and implement PD in ways that allow opportunities for participants to practice the learning from training sessions and get feedback on their practice.
- School-site administrators should ensure time for PD is protected and staff can engage in an open, reflective learning process and continually refine their practice to ensure students are prepared to meet the A–G requirements.
- Central and local district staff should continue to monitor the progress of the A–G Initiative to support the decision-making process and ensure the efforts of the A–G Initiative ultimately impact student needs.

These recommendations assume system-wide improvements and unfortunately the required systematic changes take time. Because of the complexity in establishing, not to mention implementing such overarching and challenging system improvements, it may be

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necessary to balance expectations for graduation requirements with realistic assessments of the efforts it will take to prepare our students to meet them.

For more information regarding this study see the full report:

López, Greya, Jordan Rickles, and Rosa Valdés. Implementation of the A-G Initiative: 2006–07 Final Report. Research and Evaluation, LAUSD, Publication No. 2008–02.

Available Online: research.lausd.net