

Austin Interfaith

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS TO REINVENT SCHOOL CULTURE

We care about their values, we care about who they're serving, and they've got a track record of accomplishments. They've been more successful than any other group I know, or than we as a district [have been], in getting parents from often disenfranchised communities involved in their kids' education.

— John Fitzpatrick, former member, Austin Independent School District Board of Trustees

Accountability sessions, parent and community engagement in schools, and careful work to build trust with educators are some of the strategies used by Austin Interfaith to reinvent and reinvigorate low-performing schools in Austin, Texas.

As part of the statewide Texas Industrial Areas Foundation, Austin Interfaith organized low-performing schools on the city's east side into a local network of "Alliance Schools." During an eight-year period, this network grew to involve roughly a quarter of the Austin Independent School District's elementary schools and half of the district's high-poverty schools. In these schools, Austin Interfaith organizers provided leadership training to parents, teachers, and administrators and supported them in implementing reforms to improve student learning. The organization also developed an effective working relationship with Superintendent Pascal Forgione, whose leadership of the district brought a decade of stability and concentrated focus on improving low-performing schools.

To document Austin Interfaith's education organizing and assess its impact on East Austin schools, the Annenberg Institute for School Reform followed the Alliance Schools campaign over six years, collected data from multiple sources, and analyzed these data along with data from six other urban districts around the nation. The analysis included interviews with district and school leaders, teachers, parents, and community members, as well as teacher surveys and questionnaires and publicly available school data, in an effort to understand what it takes to produce educational improvements through community organizing and what those improvements look like.

The study team's research showed that Austin Interfaith brought new resources to historically underserved schools, fostered greater trust and collaboration among parents, teachers, and administrators, and raised student performance on state-mandated standardized tests.

Community organizing in Austin influenced school district policy in a variety of ways

Organizing yielded new resources for high-poverty, low-performing schools in Austin. In particular, new funding was allocated for parent support specialists, after-school programs, bilingual education services, adult ESL programs, and teacher and administrator professional development opportunities in East Austin schools.

Austin Interfaith's organizing improved the capacity of schools to educate students successfully

Teachers in schools that were highly involved with Austin Interfaith reported significantly higher levels of trust and parent involvement and a stronger focus on learning than teachers in low-involvement schools. Teachers also reported Austin Interfaith positively influenced the quality of principal leadership, teacher commitment, and teacher collegiality.

Parents in schools that were highly involved with Austin Interfaith reported greater access to important information, more opportunities for communication, and more respect from school staff.

Austin Interfaith's organizing produced measurable gains in student outcomes

Analyses of the relationship between Austin Interfaith's involvement in schools and student performance on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) showed that deep involvement with Austin Interfaith predicted gains ranging from 15 to 19 points in the percent of students meeting minimum standards on TAAS, while lower levels of involvement predicted gains of only 4 points.

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Within Alliance Schools, Austin Interfaith engaged in a long-term process of helping parents and educators to view themselves as leaders and to work together to identify and resolve impediments to successful student learning. Organizers helped to build cohesion in schools and energize the school community with a new sense of shared purpose and potency. When the organizing efforts were sustained at a high level of intensity, this organizing contributed to notable gains in student learning.