

The Urban Education Pilot Program

Because teacher quality is highly correlated with student achievement, teacher turnover in urban schools is receiving increased attention in education research and policy. Teacher turnover is almost a third higher in low-income urban school districts; and for high-poverty school districts, the *one-year* teacher turnover rate is 20 percent. Unfortunately, this high turnover can often leave urban schools with the least qualified teachers. The Urban Education Pilot Program confronts this issue by preparing pre-service teachers for the unique challenges they will meet in urban schools with the tools they need to meet those challenges.

Transforming Public Education in Texas

UT Elementary School teachers collaborate with faculty members in The University of Texas at Austin's College of Education to integrate specific, proven practices into the undergraduate teacher education program, thereby giving new teachers the tools to provide effective, research-based education to increasing numbers of elementary-age children. With the support of the Vice President for Diversity and Community Engagement at UT Austin, the program builds on what has been learned at UT Elementary in its first six years of operation, and takes advantage of the school's role as a demonstration site for implementation of research-based practices.

The Methods

UT Elementary School attributes its success to implementation of two significant methods: Response to Intervention (RTI) and Social and Emotional Learning (SEL). These are the cornerstone of the school's educational approach and its belief in ensuring the success of each individual child.

Response to Intervention uses varied strategies and strategic intervention in regular classroom settings in an effort to ensure academic success for individual students. RTI prescribes early and frequent assessment of each student, which promptly identifies learning difficulties and concepts that need reinforcement. This allows teachers to analyze individual students' learning needs and respond immediately with specific resources and strategies. Interventions are prescribed according to a three-tier system, where students are provided additional assistance according to the level of difficulty they are experiencing. UT Elementary had such success with the Response to Intervention Model of instruction in reading that it adapted the approach to other curriculum areas.

Social and Emotional Learning is designed to promote 21st-century skills such as respect, problem solving, empathy, communication, and team work within the elementary classroom. Research shows that students from low-income backgrounds are often not motivated by the promise of a grade or competition for class rank. Rather, they are motivated by positive relationships with teachers and other adults whom they respect and whom they know respect them. These concepts are essential to the creation of a caring, respectful school environment, which in turn is essential to supporting learning for young children, especially those from economically-disadvantaged backgrounds.

Balancing these two successful instructional methods is the key to reaching children from varied backgrounds, to help them reach their full potential.

Sharing Successful Practices

Through the Urban Education Program, The University of Texas Elementary School teachers and University of Texas at Austin College of Education faculty collaborate with partnering Austin Independent School District elementary cooperating teachers, integrate "Response to Intervention" and "Social and Emotional Learning" instructional methods into the curricula for pre-service teachers at UT Austin College of Education, and create a best-practices manual. About 80 percent of College of Education graduates go on to teach in Texas and will bring these methods and other advances into their classrooms. This project extends the school's mission by addressing the need to demonstrate and disseminate educational models that blend successful, research-based elements in serving diverse young children in low-income, urban settings.



Training the Trainers

Immediately preceding the start of the Austin ISD 2008-09 academic year, UT Elementary School teachers provided direct training to cooperating teachers and principals at two AISD elementary schools. Metz and Govalle Elementary Schools partner in the Urban Education Pilot Program by providing field experiences for some of the UT students from the pilot group. UT Elementary teachers also serve as mentors to those teachers throughout the pilot program.

Enhancing the Curriculum at UT Austin College of Education



Over the 2007-08 academic year, UT Elementary School teachers collaborated with UT faculty to incorporate Response to Intervention and Social/Emotional Learning curricula into the course of study for the first pilot group of pre-service teachers. Academic areas targeted for integration include Reading/Language Arts, Reading Difficulties, Mathematics, Science, Social Studies, Classroom Management, and Early Childhood Education.

In fall 2008, 21 students in the College of Education self-selected to participate in the first student group of the two-year Urban Education Pilot Program. They are assigned to UT Elementary School, Metz, and Govalle for their field experiences, and take specific sections of required education courses that have been

adapted by participating UT faculty to include elements of RTI and SEL. Practicing teachers at UT Elementary are regularly invited to serve as guest lecturers in pre-service education classes for this pilot group, and open their classrooms for observation. Successful completion of the program will merit commendation for work in urban education by the College of Education and UT's Division of Diversity and Community Engagement.

Creating a Best-Practices Manual

The best practices manual's purpose is to give teachers in urban settings in-classroom examples showing how to focus on the individual student and his or her learning needs. Each chapter in this book is authored by a UT Elementary teacher who specializes in a particular topic. Subject areas range from reading, math, and science to parental engagement, physical education, fine arts, and the use of technology in the classrooms. The teachers provide their first-hand experiences, instructional approaches, and recommendations for incorporating RTI and SEL methods into teaching.

When completed and printed, the best practices manual will be used as a curriculum resource for future participating cohorts in the project, as well as with local urban schools accepting student teachers. UT Elementary will present this manual and specific chapters at national education conferences. With the publication of this manual, UT Elementary School is fulfilling its mission to serve as a model school for others in the community, across the state and to the nation.

Program Success

Thus far the program has been very successful, based on qualitative analysis from the participants. Students in the first cohort are extremely positive about their participation in the project, and would recommend it to their peers in the teacher preparation program.

"If I weren't a part of this cohort, I would be missing useful intervention strategies that will help me make my classroom more self-contained. I am able to apply what I've learned to help each individual child reach their goals. I will leave this program much more knowledgeable about approaches to intervention for urban students than my peers in other cohorts who are missing out on these strategies." – Amber Rector, senior, College of Education.

"I have never felt so purposeful in the classroom. I get so much more now out of being able to apply this information with the kids than do my peers in other cohorts with no specific focus. Without this program, I would be just like every other applicant after graduation- nothing to set me apart. With all the changing demographics in Texas, we *need* RTI and SEL skills. My peers will have to learn this once they get into the classroom, while I am already prepared." -- Victoria Potter, junior, College of Education



Cooperating teachers at Metz and Govalle Elementary Schools have seen several positive outcomes from the Urban Education Project:

"The response that the Urban Education Pilot Project is receiving from the East Austin community is evident throughout our campus. You will see student interns collaboratively communicating with parents and families, in order to set higher standards for student achievement. The interns at Govalle Elementary have gone beyond the student teaching experience.... They have built strong, meaningful relationships with parents, students, and faculty, who will help mentor them in their future teaching careers. These relationships help our future urban teaching taskforce have a deeper understanding of their students' backgrounds and home environment. With this knowledge the future teachers can better assess their students' performance." -- Angela Worley, kindergarten teacher at Govalle Elementary

Thank you to our Supporters

The Urban Education Pilot Program is a new project for which no funds have been specifically allocated in the past. While the school receives basic operational funding from federal and state sources as well as start-up and development costs from The University of Texas at Austin and The University of Texas System, we must rely on individual donors, corporations, and foundations to support projects such as the Urban Education Pilot Program. Thus far we have received generous funding from the RGK Foundation, the Powell Foundation, and from Suzan and Julius Glickman for the program.

The Broader Mission

The College of Education plans to use this pilot cohort as a basis to grow the project into continuing component of the professional development sequence in UT's teacher education program for years to come. Already UT Elementary hopes to continue working on the best-practices manual in order to make it a publishable book format, as well as provide a service to allow districts, administrators, and teachers across the nation to use online videos of master teacher lessons for professional development.

This program will affect an entire generation of Texas students as Texas teachers enter the urban classrooms fully prepared with the highest quality training in best-practices for instruction.