The Innovative School Reform Initiative (ISRI)

ISRI Overview

The Innovative School Reform Initiative (ISRI) was formed in February of 2004, and has conducted primary and secondary school evaluation in an effort to increase school completion rates in Texas. Through our work, we identify empirically-proven strategies that increase the success of all students. ISRI is based within the Department of Teaching, Learning, and Culture at Texas A&M University in College Station, Texas.

Current Project

ISRI has been contracted by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to evaluate the effectiveness of two related grant programs. Despite small differences in the types of activities and strategies allowable under each program, the primary objective of both is to reduce student dropout and increase student completion in Texas public high schools.

Texas High School Completion and Success

The Texas High School Completion and Success (THSCS) grant program targets students in grades nine through twelve who are at risk for not completing high school because they are either 1) deficient in credits or 2) in the eleventh grade and have not yet passed the Exit-level Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) exam. The three primary goals of the program are to 1) increase student achievement, 2) increase the number of students who graduate in four years after entering ninth grade, and 3) increase the number of students who graduate college-ready.

THSCS grants were awarded to districts in two cycles. Cycle 1 serves 127 districts and approximately 246 campuses. Lasting only one year, Cycle 1 grants will conclude in August, 2005. Beginning in November, 2004, Cycle 2 will last just under two years (concluding in August of 2006) and serve 106 districts.

Texas Grants to Reduce Academic Dropout (TXGRAD)

The two primary goals of the TXGRAD program are to 1) increase the number of students who graduate from high school and 2) address the underlying factors identified as a cause of certain students' failure to complete high school. The TXGRAD program covers middle and high schools at 64 sites in 13 districts. The year-long grant program will conclude in August, 2005.

Examples of Grant-Funded Activities

Accompanying the specific requirements of each program are groups of activities and strategies districts can support with grant funds and implement across sites. Common to both grants are activities and strategies that provide direct and indirect support to students. Examples of direct support include credit recovery programs and online diagnostic assessment and tutoring. Indirect support includes funding for additional counselors and paraprofessionals and mentoring and work study programs for students.

Evaluation Design

Over a three year period, the evaluation will examine the effect of each grant program on high school campuses in Texas. The evaluation includes both formative and summative components, as well as establishment of frameworks for longitudinal analysis.

Primary Research Questions

- Which types of activities/strategies did grantees choose to implement on their campuses? (formative)
- Were the activities and strategies fully implemented? (summative)
- Were project goals reached? (summative)
- Which strategies and activities were most effective in reducing dropout rate and increasing completion rate? (summative)
- Do students served by grant funds progress through high school at the expected rate after grant services have ceased? (longitudinal analysis)

Data Sources

The evaluation employs several types of data acquired from a range of sources.

- **AEIS**
  Profiles of project campuses are based on data available in the *Academic Excellence Indicator System* (AEIS). Academic and demographic variables form the basis for descriptive profiles of project campuses. These profiles

are also used to identify comparison campuses that are similar on key variables but are not involved in either grant program.

- **Project Progress Reports**
  A *Project Progress Report* (PPR) is administered each semester to obtain campus level information on project implementation. Grantees identify all activities/strategies funded under the grant, report on level of project implementation, the number of staff funded by the grant as well as the number of students served by each activity.
- **Student Information Report**
  The *Student Information Report* addresses the credit accrual component of each grant program. Individual level data is collected each semester on the students served by each type of activity. These data reflect the number of credits accrued through grant funded activities such as trailer courses, credit recovery programs, and online high school courses essential for Exit-level TAKS.
- **PEIMS**
  Based on the *Student Information Report*, additional demographic and academic information is acquired by matching student IDs with *Public Education Information Management System* (PEIMS) data. These data include ethnicity, LEP, migrant status and TAKS scores for English, mathematics, science, and social studies, to name a few. At the close of Cycle 1, student identification numbers will permit a longitudinal analysis of these students as they progress through high school.
- **Site Visits**
  Site visits conducted on a sample of campuses will provide a measure of the extent and quality of the implementation of state-identified strategies for improving dropout rates and high school completion. A High School Implementation Review (HSIR) checklist will be used as an interview protocol with a representative faculty team to determine quality and extent of implementation of specific state-identified strategies for reducing dropouts, as well as successes and critical barriers in achieving goals of the programs,

Statistical Analysis

- **Process**
  The process portion of the evaluation relies on descriptive analyses of participating districts, campuses, target populations, and activities to document project implementation. The descriptive information obtained at the end of each semester is the basis for the evaluation of program outcomes.
- **Outcome**
  A non-equivalent control group design will be used to identify the practices that are most effective in reducing dropout and increasing completion. Each participating project campus will be matched to a campus that is not funded by either grant but is equivalent on a set of key variables, specifically dropout rate. Analysis of covariance will be used to identify project campuses that exhibit a significant 1) increase in the number of students completing high school or 2) a significant decrease in the dropout rate.

Contributions of the Evaluation

- Strategies and activities that are most effective in combating dropout and increasing completion will be identified.
- The longitudinal analysis of student progress through high school will be a unique contribution to the literature on high schools and dropout prevention programs.
- The comparison of project campuses with equivalent but non-funded campuses will broaden the scope and depth of current high school evaluations.
- Empirical evidence will be obtained on program effectiveness that is vital to state-level policy decisions and future program development.

PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATORS

The Innovative School Reform Initiative (ISRI) is part of the College of Education and Human Development at Texas A&M University.

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