The Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD) developed the John Leslie Patton Jr. Academic Center (Academic Center) to address growing concerns over graduation and dropout rates among Dallas ISD students. The Academic Center was designed to be an alternative school for over-age, under-credited students. The Academic Center, slated to open in September 2010, was developed by the Over-Age Academic Center Task Force and was still in the planning stages at the time of publication. The Over-Age Academic Center Task Force began meeting in November 2009 to assess the program’s physical environment needs; develop student selection criteria, protocols, and processes; determine services available through the new campus such as transportation, mentors, and job placement; hire a principal for the new school as well as staff other required positions; and finalize the program’s budget.

The Academic Center schedule was designed to accommodate 700 students during three sessions: 250 in the morning, 250 in the afternoon, and another 200 in the evening. The Task Force planned that the evening session would only be scheduled if the morning and afternoon sessions do not meet enrollment demand. At the time of this report’s publication, the Academic Center was accepting student applications and determining eligibility as students applied. Once school begins, the registrar planned to refer students who are not eligible to attend to the appropriate home school. As of August 17, 2010, the student roster included 326 potential Academic Center students. It was unclear whether these were students who the registrar had already determined were eligible, or whether it was students who had applied.

**Program Components**

The Over-age High School Task Force had a core membership of approximately 22 district staff, representing departments and functions across the district such as Budget, Grants, Student Services, Compliance, School Leadership, Campus Personnel, Facilities, Maintenance, Furnishings and Textbooks, Instructional Services, College Readiness, Technology, Evaluation and Accountability, Transportation, and Security. Additional members were added to the group as needs arose during the development process, and other members stopped attending meetings as work was completed.

Dallas ISD had significant experience building new schools and most of the components of developing the Academic Center were no different from those usually required. For example, new schools require a calendar for completion, a finalized curriculum, textbook requisitions, the same basic furniture, signage, food services, security, transportation plans, personnel, instructional technology, and teacher professional development. This school, however, presented a unique situation for the district because it was the first of its kind and had additional requirements. First, the school did not have bond funds to cover startup expenses, so the budget was amended to make allowances for necessary purchases prior to the beginning of the 2010-2011 school budget, available on July 1, 2010. Second, this school was intended for students with additional needs that the traditional school setting did not accommodate. The new school needed additional services and resources such as social service advisors, dual credit opportunities, child care, flexible scheduling, job placement services and others not usually offered on typical campuses. These services required additional time and expertise to put in place.

**Student Demographics**

The majority of the student population on the roster at the Academic Center was Hispanic (62%) or African American (33%), male (63%), and economically disadvantaged (60%). A large portion of the student body would enter as sophomores (40%) and 28 percent would enter as freshmen. According to the roster, half (50%) of the students entering the new school would be 17 or 18 years old.

**Student Selection Criteria**

The Task Force decided that eligible students must meet the following criteria:

- 17 years or older with less than 5 credits
- 18 years or older with less than 12 credits
- 19 years or older with less than 18 credits
- 20 years or older

There were three 16 year olds on the roster, in violation of the selection criteria. The average number of credits for 17 year olds (5.9 credits) exceeded the stated limit in the eligibility criteria (5 credits). The maximum number of credits held by a 17 year old was 15 credits, well above the five credit maximum. The maximum number of credits for 18 and 19 year olds (16.5 and 21.5, respectively) also exceeded the stated...
limits (12 and 18, respectively). It was evident from discussions with Academic Center staff and review of the student roster that eligibility criteria had not been finalized and procedures for vetting new students had not been fully tested or evaluated.

School Curriculum
The school curriculum for the 2010-11 school year was planned to incorporate a variety of instructional methods to accommodate students’ varying needs, including: direct instruction, blended online instruction, assisted self-paced work, remedial individualized tutoring, and Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) Prep (built into the curriculum).

Each term was planned to be nine weeks, with two terms per semester. Each subject's curriculum was designed with the 21st Century Skills in mind; these are skills recognized as translating effectively from school to the workplace. The curriculum was created to focus on developing learning and information skills, information, media and technology skills, and life and career skills. In addition to core courses, Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses were planned.

Services and Resources
The Academic Center planned to offer students services and resources to assist them with their differing needs. At the time of publication, the evaluator was unable to determine through documentation specifically what social services would be offered to students. The social service advisors reported having differing certifications allowing them to offer complimentary services, trainings, and support to students.

Mission and Motto
The Task Force determined the mission of the Academic Center to be to provide a quality education designed to help students accelerate to graduation while attaining career skills and certificates for the workforce or college. The motto was planned to be “Developing Leaders; Defining Success.” The expected outcomes for students at the Academic Center were the same as those for the district as a whole: to graduate students who are college and workforce ready.

Goals and Outcomes
Task Force members hoped the Academic Center would take students at risk of dropping out, or who had already dropped out, and help them complete a high school diploma (rather than testing for a GED) by meeting their unique needs and providing a safe environment for them to learn and succeed. Task Force members reported that the group developed the expected outcomes for the Academic Center by understanding the student population with which they were working and creating opportunities for them to succeed at the new school, in contrast to the traditional setting.

Successes and Barriers
Overall, Task Force members reported that the development process for the Academic Center went smoothly. In particular, members reported that all necessary departments were represented and that meetings were productive. Task Force members reported that not all members of the Task Force were included from the beginning and regular meetings did not occur until mid-year 2010, acting as a barrier to success. The Task Force members’ main concerns were 1) the timeline set for completing the new school, 2) the budget, and 3) the order in which some tasks were completed.

Summary and Recommendations
The most critical components when developing a new school were identified as: 1) the calendar/timeline for completion, 2) the student selection criteria, 3) the curriculum, and 4) hiring the principal.

There were five recommendations as a result of this evaluation. First, identify key Dallas ISD staff with experience developing new schools and bring them onto the project at the start of planning. Second, create a calendar/timeline for completion based on when students and staff will arrive at the new school, and then work backwards to start dates for tasks. Third, choose the school site based on the needs of the school rather than choosing a site and then building the school program around the available space. Fourth, ensure all key staff are hired and oriented to the development process in a timely manner to ensure decisions are made and projects can continue moving forward without being delayed by transitions. And fifth, create protocols and structures to organize work and decision making. Much of the work of the Task Force was not documented, which made it difficult to track work completed, decisions, and responsible parties.

Additional information may be obtained by consulting the John Leslie Patton Jr. Academic Center Report, EA10-136-2, which can be found at www.dallasisd.org/inside_disd/depts/evalacct/.