Parent Services and School Choice: 2009-10

Talia Gursky, M.A.

At a Glance

The Parent Services and School Choice department at the Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD) was funded by Title I, part A, and strived to increase parental engagement and participation through various activities. Parent Services activities included providing trainings, workshops, and resources to parents. The grant also funded technical assistance, staff training, and resources for schools to increase parental involvement, as well as special programs such as college fairs and parent resource rooms.

The focus of the 2009-2010 Parent Services and School Choice evaluation was to 1) describe the College Fair and examine survey data, 2) describe the Fall and Spring Las Llaves del Exíto events and examine exit survey data, 3) describe Parent Celebration events, and 4) describe the Parent Centers and the resources they provide.

College Fair

The Dallas ISD hosted a College Fair on September 23, 2009, where colleges and universities presented information about their programs. Survey responses showed that nearly all 755 attendees planned to attend college (97.3%) and more than nine out of ten students had parental support to do so. Nearly all respondents believed the College Fair should be held again next year (95.5%). Survey questions focused on convenience of the event and students’ future plans; therefore, it is difficult to ascertain the amount of information students gathered and retained about higher education, and their level of engagement with the colleges in attendance.

Las Llaves del Exíto

Both the Fall and Spring Las Llaves del Exíto events were hosted by Dallas ISD in conjunction with the Dallas County Community College District for students and their families. Survey results showed that the majority of parents and students found the information helpful and believed it helped prepare them for college. During the fall event held on October 31st, 2009, 120 parents and 526 students filled out surveys, and 95.9 percent of parents and 87.6 percent of students agreed Las Llaves increased their understanding of how to prepare for college. The spring Las Llaves was held on February 27th, 2010, and 67 parents and 244 students completed surveys. Again, 98.4 percent of parents and 97.5 percent of students agreed the event helped them prepare for college, and 93.1 percent of parents reported that the information they received helped them realize that college was financially attainable. Still, over a third of both parents and students (37.8% and 35.0%, respectively) reported finances may prevent the student from attending college. At the fall event, more parents than students reported that the information presented helped them realize that college was financially attainable (98.0% vs. 81.1%).

According to survey data, there was a concerning perception among the majority of parents (66.7%) and 28.3 percent of students at the fall event that they did not receive information about college attendance until the high school years. Considering that this finding is consistent with prior years, the district may consider reevaluating the delivery mechanism for college readiness information during the elementary and middle school years, noting that parents are more likely than students not to receive information on college until the high school years. Further, survey responses suggested the information that students and parents do receive regarding college preparation could be improved by emphasizing the importance of taking appropriate coursework to prepare for and get admitted to college. Parent education on college preparation should also address potential barriers to college attendance, targeting the belief of one in five parents that college was not necessary for their child to succeed.

Parent Celebrations

Parent Services provided 21 Parent Celebration events during the school year. Parent Celebration events were characterized primarily by student performances and opportunities for parents, students and faculty to interact informally. Parents appeared to enjoy student performances. Staff described the Celebrations as functioning to test different activities in order to identify ways to add value to the events in future years. Identifying criteria of and goals for a successful Parent Celebration would assist the department in gauging effectiveness in the future.
Parent Centers

Parent Centers provided varying resources to the parents they served, while meeting the broadly defined goals of the program. The non-specific nature of the goals, which included encouraging parent involvement by providing resources to strengthen parent-school interaction and providing space for parents within schools, made it difficult to measure concrete outcomes. Revising the goals of the centers to be more outcome-oriented, rather than focusing on outputs, would allow for a more effective evaluation of the program. Despite this, the centers observed were largely successful at providing space, even if it was small, shared, or simply an office, and resources of varying types and utility to parents. It is unclear, however, if providing space and resources are universally sufficient to encourage parent engagement.

Recommendations

Parent Services activities may benefit from identifying more specific goals at the programmatic level. While most programming appears to function adequately, it is difficult to evaluate success without defined goals. Identification of specific measures of success for each type of program facilitated by Parent Services would allow future evaluations to gauge success more specifically and accurately.

For more information, see EA10-151-2, at http://www.dallasisd.org/inside_disd/depts/evalacct/index.htm