Reconnection Center Program: 2010-11

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At-a-Glance

The Reconnection (Reconnect) program was designed to assist students recover credits for incomplete (due to excessive absences) or failed courses. The program allowed students to remain enrolled in courses in the traditional classroom setting on their campus while recovering credit in Reconnect centers during assigned periods. Credit recovery allowed students to remain on track to be promoted or graduate with their cohort.

The Reconnect program provided students with online and offline work. The online work was prescriptive, meaning that the student pre-tested over the objectives in a module, using NovaNET. The pre-test determined which objectives the student needed to master. The student worked through only those modules and was tested again at completion. As the student mastered a module, they moved to the next module. The student did not have to spend additional time on those modules whose objectives had been mastered; they were able to focus on only those objectives they had not mastered. Offline coursework was generated from the district's mandated curriculum (Curriculum Planning Guides). Students completed work based on the requirements of the district prescribed curriculum. With successful completion of prescriptive online work, teacher-graded offline work, and the district Assessment of Course Performance (ACP) test, students were awarded credit using district grading standards.

Program Characteristics

Students could attend Reconnect before or after school, or be assigned to the program during the regular school day. Staffing had been a consistent issue for Reconnect in that the program did not always receive the campus support it required. The grant required a Reconnect center be in every comprehensive high school and the program used grant funds to employ one facilitator at each campus. The school was then expected to match teachers but this did not always occur. During the 2010-11 school year, all 22 campuses maintained their staffing levels from the 2009-10 school year and seven campuses gained staff. Two centers were operating with four teachers and six centers had only one teacher.

Program Implementation

The Reconnect program had great potential to serve students when it was implemented as designed. The Reconnect program required a great deal of self-motivation and independent effort. Counselors on the campuses were mainly responsible for selecting students. Reconnect facilitators reported that principals were the driving force in how the Reconnection center program was implemented on each campus and that counselors carried the responsibility of moving students in and out of the program. If the principal did not accept the guidelines of the program, they had the authority to make adjustments in how students were served thereby affecting the success of the program. There continued to be some issues regarding the relationship between campus administration, counselors, and Reconnect staff. Facilitators reported that their relationship with campus staff was a major contributor to the number of students they were able to serve each year.

Observations continued to show that the Reconnect staff had developed a positive rapport with their students and were making a contribution to the success of their students. Results of interviews with program staff suggested that the best program environment for Reconnect students was one that enabled focus and work without distraction.

Student Demographics

The Reconnect program served 4,318 students during the 2010-11 school year, a 14 percent increase from the 2009-10 school year. The majority of Reconnect students were seniors or juniors, male, Hispanic, and economically disadvantaged. The average age was about 18 and the average GPA was about 77 percent.

Student Achievement Outcomes

Reconnection students attended school less often than those students not in the program. Reconnection students were likely to have family and personal issues that interfered with their ability to attend school. Reconnect students attended school about 85 percent of the time while non-Reconnect students attended about 92 percent of the time. Reconnect student also received lower TAKS scores than their counterparts. Reconnect students scored better than non-Reconnect students on five ACP exams but scored at least five percentage points lower on 23 exams. As expected, Reconnect students had a lower GPA than did non-Reconnect students (i.e., about 77% and 81%, respectively).

School Staff Perceptions

Results of interviews with campus administrators and counselors suggested that relationships between
campus and Reconnect staff were positive; however, most of the campus staff who consented to interviews were working on campuses with successful Reconnect centers. Thus, these findings could be skewed. Interviews did allow the evaluator to collect data on some best practices (e.g., clear criteria for selecting students, assigning students to the program for the appropriate class period, and removing students from the program once they had completed their credits).

**Selecting the Right Candidates**

The Reconnect program was designed for students who had reading ability, motivation, ability to work independently, and regular attendance. Some facilitators were responsible for finding students for the program while others could rely on their campus counselors. In some cases the counselors assigned inappropriate students and there was little the facilitator could do; in others the facilitators could send the student back to the counselor for reassignment. Reconnect teachers reported that the program was better suited to students with higher levels of maturity. The program also best served students who were not too far behind in their credits. Students took the Basic Achievement Skills Inventory (BASI) test, a test of math, reading, and language skills, before entering the program. If a student scored below a sixth grade reading level they were not considered a good candidate for the program. Of the students in Reconnect who took the BASI, 60 percent had scored below a sixth grade reading level. In addition to low BASI scores, approximately eight percent of Reconnect students from the 2010-11 school year were classified as Special Education. Facilitators reported that students with special needs or those who did not pass the BASI required more assistance and recovered credits more slowly.

**Data Integrity**

Data integrity continued to be a major issue for the Reconnect program this year. Reconnect management staff worked with Management Information Systems staff to develop a database for electronic record keeping but were unable to complete the project this year. The program then used an Excel spreadsheet to collect data on courses taken, course grades, and exam grades but the spreadsheet was not very user-friendly and facilitators were resistant to the change. The program faced a major problem with noncompliance. Some facilitators did not turn in completed gradebooks on time and provided incomplete or inaccurate data. And, like in previous years, there was little program management could do to hold facilitators accountable. The program continued to work with campus staff to implement the program as designed but there was little program management could do if an administrator was not in agreement about how to use the program.

The program also provided a list of student IDs for the evaluator to match with Dallas ISD Student Records databases. Accuracy continued to be a problem with regards to this data. Many of the errors were due to facilitators not collecting complete information from students or making careless mistakes with data entry. This is another area where accountability has yet to be established.

**Program Level Outcomes**

Data at the time of this evaluation did not allow the evaluator to determine the effectiveness of the program. Greater staff accountability is needed to ensure future evaluations can better measure program success. The evaluator planned to focus on the factors contributing to the number of students served and credits earned in each center. Because of data integrity issues, it was impossible for the evaluator to use quantitative data to confirm anecdotal reports. Based on the observation, interviews, and focus group, the evaluator determined that there were several potential factors contributing to a center’s success: number of teachers, teacher certification, types of courses taken, how often certain courses were taken, completion times for courses, student’s reading level, special education needs, facilitator-administrator and -counselor relationships, and availability of space and computers. Because the program collected little electronic data, used mainly hard copy forms and did not have good tracking systems available, any efforts to determine which factors were most important and what changes improve success were hindered. A majority of Reconnect centers increased the number of students served and credits earned from the 2009-10 school year. Unfortunately, the program was unable to determine why these increases occurred specifically due to insufficient data. When reviewing average credit completion numbers it appeared that six centers were having issues with course completion. Two centers were high performers. It would be useful for the 2011-12 evaluation to focus specifically on low performing and high performing centers to better determine best practices and identify barriers to success.

**Recommendations**

There were four recommendations as a result of the 2010-11 evaluation. First, require facilitators to give the BASI to all students entering the Reconnect program. Second, set clear criteria for selecting students for the program and moving them in and out of the program. Third, work with campus administrators to increase accountability of facilitators and teaching staff. Fourth, continue to work with Management Information Systems to develop a better database system to track student progress through the program.
Additional information may be obtained by consulting the Reconnection Center program report, EA11-132-2, which can be found at [www.dallasisd.org/inside_disd/depts/evalacct/](http://www.dallasisd.org/inside_disd/depts/evalacct/).