The Dallas Independent School District expanded its partnership with Big Thought, a non-profit organization focused on enriching education through creative learning, to provide summer camps primarily for failing elementary and middle school students. For elementary students, the Thriving Minds Summer Camp extended traditional and bilingual instruction through core curriculum integrated with studies in the arts. The summer of 2011 marked the second year implementing this program. The first year for the middle school Thriving Minds Summer Camp, 2011, infused a project-based learning (PBL) curriculum with the community resources at Fair Park and career exploration.

The PBL-based summer camp curriculum incorporated “driving questions” into each academic subject to facilitate student learning by completing real world projects. A consultant from PBL Associates met with curriculum writers during the school year to support the creation of new project-based curricula written specifically for summer. Along with PBL, the middle school Thriving Minds Summer Camp program incorporated an exploratory class that focused on careers. The corollary at Elementary summer camp included studio time which was led by Fine Arts Specialists from the district and community professionals (i.e. teaching artists).

The purpose of the Thriving Minds Summer Camp Teacher Training was to provide elementary and middle school teachers with two days of quality training, during which teachers would be introduced to the arts-integrated and PBL curriculum model.

**Elementary School Training**

All elementary summer camp staff joined 698 classroom teachers on June 28th and June 29th for curriculum training and campus planning. Seven hours of professional development were offered each day. Over 95 percent ($N = 666$) of the attendees were present all 14 hours; 19 (2.7%) were present for one day or less.

Curriculum writers introduced and trained elementary summer camp teachers on the summer camp curriculum for approximately two hours on June 28th and 29th. A consultant from PBL Associates introduced the district’s new approach to summer camp learning in a PBL seminar presented to all elementary summer camp staff. Teachers rotated through three workshops: Curriculum Overview (led by curriculum writers), Integration and Team Teaching (led by Integration Specialists), and Curriculum Study/Discussion and Logistics (led by Site Managers). In addition to the workshops, a large amount of time was allocated for campus meetings and planning sessions.

The number of years teaching within the Dallas ISD varied considerably among elementary summer camp teachers; experience ranged from 24 teachers who had recently finished their first year with the Dallas ISD to 22 with over 30 years of experience. Over 57 percent had eight or fewer years of experience. Data was not available for two participants. The percentage of teachers with advanced degrees was quite high with 237 (34.0%) of the 698 total teachers having obtained at least a masters degree. Exactly 25 teachers during the elementary school Thriving Minds Summer Camp were alternative certification interns.

**Middle School Training**

On June 27th, 71 exploratory teachers (36.6% of the summer camp teacher trainees) received SPARKS training and explored a variety of career fields to help students connect school and career goals during the exploratory class time. During one period, teachers explored ways to create a positive, emotionally safe classroom environment. Poor communication about the exploratory session contributed to confusion about the session’s start time and the number of teachers attending. Expecting a morning session, as was communicated to teachers on June 6, the evaluator observed at least 15 teachers waiting at 8:30 a.m. Additionally, when the session began at 1:00 p.m. three times more teachers attended than were expected, leading to an extreme shortage of materials and handouts. Through four hours, the training staff adapted capably and succeeded in providing all participants with the prepared content.

All middle school summer camp staff, including 191 classroom teachers, met on June 28th and June 29th for curriculum and campus based training. Seven hours of training were provided each day. Three teachers who had attended the exploratory session on the previous day did not attend the regular training days. Nearly 80 percent of the attendees were present all 14 hours; 15 were present for one day or less.

Curriculum writers introduced and trained middle school summer camp teachers on the summer camp curriculum for approximately seven hours. The representative from PBL Associates, who was consulted throughout curriculum development, led a
one-hour session emphasizing the characteristics of a successful PBL environment. A one-hour session introduced the science opportunities at the Trinity River Audobon Center and reviewed the logistics for the first-week field trip. Another session explored ways to create a positive, emotionally safe classroom environment, the same session attended by teachers during the exploratory training on June 27. Two hours were reserved for a walking tour of Fair Park; the tour was shortened to approximately 20 minutes due to extreme heat. Additionally, a large amount of time was allocated for campus meetings and curriculum planning sessions.

The number of years teaching within the Dallas ISD varied considerably among the middle school teachers, ranging from 1 to 38 years. Almost 60 percent had eight or fewer years of experience. Data were not available for one participant. The percentage of teachers with advanced degrees was quite high with 82 (42.3%) of the 194 total teachers having a masters degree. Exactly 10 teachers during the middle school Thriving Minds Summer Camp were alternative certification interns.

**Recommendations**

Interviews with program management revealed a lack of communication between the Dallas ISD and Big Thought about teacher training. Specifically, training organizers reported that they received very little information from the Dallas ISD regarding logistical concerns, content concerns, and the district’s professional development requirements. Going forward, the district should be more responsive to these concerns.

Additional information about the Thriving Minds Summer Camps may be obtained by consulting EA11-160-2, which can be found at www.dallasisd.org/inside_disd/depts/evalacct/.