

ASPIRE Academy Program Evaluation

Executive Summary

Data Collection Summary

Document Review

- ASPIRE Curriculum Documents
- ASPIRE Mission, Goals, and Student Outcomes
- ASPIRE Program Descriptions and History
- De-identified Student Achievement Data

Surveys (n = 566) (Surveys were anonymous and online)

- Parent Survey (n = 293)
- Student Survey (n = 254)
- Teacher Survey (n = 17)

Focus Groups (15 groups; n = 90)

- Six Parent Focus Groups (n = 34)
- Three Teacher Focus Groups (n = 16)
- Three Student Focus Groups (n = 25)
- One Counselor Focus Group (n = 9)
- Two Administrator Focus Groups (n = 6)

Meetings and Conference Calls with ASPIRE Leadership Team

- Clarifying Questions (e.g. training, schedules, curriculum and instruction)
- Self-Assessment on Evidence-Based Practices

Campus Visits

- Every ASPIRE class observed
- Multiple times at each campus (e.g. for focus groups)

Total Participation = 658 (includes possible duplicates across surveys and focus groups)

Summary of Strengths

Student achievement on typical measures is exceptional.

- 100% of students demonstrate College Board's College Readiness benchmarks during middle school.
- STAAR Scores are high across the board and increase as grade levels increase.
- PSAT 8/9 and PSAT scores range from 91st to 98th percentile over the last three years.
- AP Testing exceeds local, state, and national averages.
- Aimsweb Math testing 96th percentile
- Aimsweb Reading testing 97th percentile

Grouping ASPIRE students together yields academic as well as social benefits.

- All groups surveyed agreed that the grouping structure is needed.
- The grouping facilitates consistent delivery of advanced instruction.
- Students overwhelmingly mentioned feeling accepted in the ASPIRE structure.
- Many students described the ASPIRE cohort as their core friend group.
- Grouping facilitates wide use of acceleration methods in math and science.

ASPIRE teachers are knowledgeable and skilled at working with exceptional students.

- The strength of the teachers was mentioned repeatedly in parent comments.
- Students also praised the strength of the teachers.
- Meetings and observations with teachers suggested they were well-versed in the needs of gifted students and advanced content knowledge.
- Parents also mentioned that though some teachers were not good fits with the ASPIRE expectations, they were replaced with teachers who were much stronger.

ASPIRE students are happy and thankful for this opportunity.

- Some students described the ASPIRE Academy as life changing.
- Parents confirmed that their students liked school more than ever since ASPIRE.
- Students noted the vast differences between ASPIRE classes and general classes.
- For students, the peer group in ASPIRE is a critical feature of their experience.

ASPIRE students are challenged more than they have ever been challenged in school.

- Students generally described ASPIRE classes as challenging, more challenging than any previous experiences even in other gifted education programs.
- However, students also suggested that it could be more challenging, and teachers do not push them enough.
- Parents generally agreed that the learning experiences challenge their students.

Acceleration in Mathematics is an ASPIRE program strength.

- Data indicated that ASPIRE systematically removes the ceiling for students to advance at their own pace in mathematics.
- Evidence of math acceleration was widespread across elementary and middle school.
- Developing advanced math skills was the most agreed upon area among the core curriculum in terms of the program's success at content expertise.

Critical thinking skills are a focus and student performances reflect critical thinking.

- Survey responses indicated agreement that students are learning to think critically.
- Parents mentioned critical thinking skills often as evidence of how their students are developing in ASPIRE.
- Students and teachers also mentioned thinking critically as a feature of the program.

ASPIRE is an accepting and supportive learning environment.

- This was observed in campus visits and widely confirmed in student feedback.
- Parents agreed that ASPIRE provided an excellent learning environment for students.
- The national standards reflection indicated learning environment is a major strength.

ASPIRE program leadership is a strength and essential for continued growth.

- Teacher feedback overwhelmingly indicated they were well supported by leadership.
- Campus administrators described ASPIRE leadership as committed and supportive of their campus efforts.
- Parents indicated that they feel confident in the current leadership to continue to build and improve the program.
- The leadership is very knowledgeable about exceptional gifted education and the dynamics of change and improvement in school systems.

Summary of Areas for Improvement

ASPIRE curriculum needs to be written, comprehensive, and aligned to maximize student achievement and program stability over time.

- Much of the curriculum is teacher specific and not systematically developed.
- While teachers appreciate freedoms within the curriculum, they agree that curriculum clarity and stability is widely needed.
- ASPIRE program documents indicate that the Parallel Curriculum Model is the foundation of the curriculum, but there is very little use of the PCM, and teachers reported they know very little about the model.
- Systematic alignment of curriculum should better align with advanced products and performances consistent with the work of professionals in those domains by the end of high school.

More STEM focus is desired and needed, especially in elementary and high school.

- Parents, students, and teachers themselves agreed that elementary science needs to be strengthened in order to better align with the accelerated middle school science program.
- Students expressed a clear desire for more science that is real experimentation.
- Parents' perception was that the elementary science program is not much different than the typical science program and other elementary schools had stronger STEM focus than the ASPIRE elementary program.
- High school students wanted more STEM learning, mentorship, and career exploration in the ASPIRE Academy.

Career exploration, mentorships, and internship opportunities are widely desired.

- Feedback from parents and students clearly revealed a gap between what is offered and what is desired in this area, especially by middle school and high school.
- This was similarly reflected in the feedback that the program purports to be individualized but, has minimal individualization. There may be a connection between the desire for more customization at the individual level and opportunities for students to explore potential career fields more actively.

Teachers want more focused training and resources specifically in the area of specialized instruction and curriculum.

- The teacher survey indicated that teachers did not agree that they had received much training in the areas of specialized instruction appropriate for the expectations of ASPIRE.
- Teachers also indicated that they generally would like more resources to support their advanced instruction in areas such as critical thinking, creative thinking, problem solving, and solving real-world problems.
- The feedback suggested that the training was more on the needs of the highly gifted students but lacking on the pedagogy of highly gifted education.

Developing leadership skills is a stated goal of the ASPIRE program, but the data widely indicated that little if any curriculum, instruction, or experience was devoted to leadership.

- No one talked about leadership opportunities as a positive experience of the program in focus groups.
- The teachers did not mention it in focus groups or open-ended survey items.
- Survey responses suggested there was little emphasis on leadership development.
- If it is not really a goal, remove it, but if it is a goal, it needs significant development.

Several responses mentioned improving communication skills as an area that the program could be strengthened.

- Parents brought up the need for students to improve communication frequently.
- Some mentioned communication skills as a potential weakness.
- There was some suggestion that the emphasis on accepting “quirkiness” was actually an implicit barrier to efforts to develop better communication skills.
- There were no curriculum documents detailing the variety of ways that communication skills could be developed or emphasized.

There were several focus areas or learning opportunities that came up as ways that the ASPIRE Academy could be expanded. Those include the following:

- Developing bilingual students beginning in elementary school
- More academic competitions across all levels and areas
- More educational field trips connected to their advanced curriculum
- Expanded STEM opportunities like engineering and computer science
- Time management and stress management
- Mentorships, internships, and independent studies
- Partnerships with universities for expanded learning opportunities
- Better use of the talent development plans (personalization)
- Grouping by strength and interest in middle school and high school
- Advanced ASPIRE electives, especially at elementary but not limited to elementary.
- Need for dedicated ASPIRE counselors.

Larger, Systemic Areas for Improvement

Strengthen the ASPIRE identity by more clearly defining the program goals.

- There seemed to be a split between those who want ASPIRE to be mostly about social and emotional needs and those who want ASPIRE to be devoted to exceptional achievement.
- There is tremendous diversity among those who are highly gifted, and it sometimes seems like the program is trying to be a perfect home for everyone—which is probably not possible.
- There are ways that the emphasis on social and emotional needs interferes with the quest for exceptional academic opportunity and achievement.
- Rather than trying to be everything for this population, ASPIRE may be stronger moving forward if it clearly defines what it does, does it exceptionally well, and is unapologetic about those emphases. For example, the academic grouping is a critical component of the ASPIRE program, yet some want to be in more classes with the general population. It is reasonable to suggest that if you want more time with the general population, participate in the GT program but not the ASPIRE program.

The ASPIRE high school program is tenuous at best despite some talented, hard-working teachers who are very committed to the kids and program. It may benefit from some form of restructure or rebranding.

- A common response was that ASPIRE in high school was essentially no different than GT in high school.
- ASPIRE in high school seemed to become just a humanities program whereas it had included all areas of the curriculum up through grade 8.
- The high school indicated minimal support for ASPIRE as it is now.
- The blending of AP and ASPIRE may not be the best approach, and other people seem to agree. However, the GPA policy is the driver that seems to be forcing the program into a curriculum and pedagogy that does not extend the previous eight years of the program. It may be the case that ASPIRE at the high school could involve multiple pathways. For instance, those who want to mostly focus on AP courses, those who want to deeply study one area of interest (e.g. chemistry, biology, computer science), those who want a real humanities experience that does not force fit itself with AP course expectations, those who want to do independent research with professional mentors and internships.