



TEXAS STUDY

Vol. XXIII, No. 2

OF SECONDARY EDUCATION

Spring 2014

The Texas Association of Secondary School Principals



**Lessons Learned on
Instructional Leadership**

Advanced Academic Teams

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Forbes recently (Oct. 11) posted the article “The 10 Skills Employers Most Want In 20-Something Employees.” The skills were listed in order of importance. The first skill listed was “ability to work in a team,” which should not be a surprise to anyone involved in business and industry. Many hiring mistakes are made when people are employed who have all the job task skills, but who are unable to execute their jobs effectively because they lack the people- and/or team-related skills. Public schools are not charged with just teaching students how to read, write and solve math problems. Clearly, society expects us to teach our students a variety of communication skills and how to work in teams and small groups in ways that lead to productive discussions, effective planning and realistic problem solving.

To that end, we in Greenville ISD created and implemented the program “Advanced Academic Teams” (AAT’s). We constructed this model based on a rich history and experience with cooperative learning strategies based on the works of David Johnson, Roger Johnson, Dr. Spencer Kagan and Miguel Kagan. In addition, we have researched organizations like Fossil and IDEO and their use of self-directed work teams and design teams to create products and solve problems.

In designing this instructional arrangement model, we believed that it must accomplish several purposes. First, by utilizing the principles of cooperative learning, we are able to simulate some of the work-team models that adults experience in the workplace. Cooperative learning is a proven instructional program that facilitates learning and helps students master the standards and content being taught. Second, students must be taught how to work in team situations to solve problems and develop products. Third, students must be taught the social skills necessary to work on an effective learning team. Fourth, students are encouraged to take more responsibility for their own education and track their own levels of mastery. Fifth, students must be prepared for college and post-high school work environments. Finally, our teachers will become facilitators of learning experiences so students can become more self-directed learners.

The role of the teacher in this program is to design the instructional challenges and lessons for the students and to facilitate the learning processes. The teacher will establish the AAT’s by assigning the students to their teams and then teaching the students the basic concepts related to cooperative learning. Once the AAT’s are activated, the teacher will need to monitor and assist the AAT’s as they work on the assignment. The teacher will develop the lesson around the necessary state standards and define the scope of work that will be required of each team. This type of lesson will require a lot of “front-end” work on the part of the teacher. Each team will be given specific problems to solve, products to create, assignments to complete, etc. The teacher will provide a synopsis for each assignment which will clearly define the required actions of each team and how they will be assessed. In the first class meeting starting on a new assignment, the teacher will fully explain the assignment and tasks involved. Each team of students will review their assignment, discuss it among themselves, and seek clarification from their teacher for any part that is unclear. In the next class period, the teams will be allowed to meet in the media center or Lions’ Den. During this class period, the students will conduct research, collaborate and otherwise work on the assignment. The teacher will check on them in the Lions’ Den and monitor their task dedication and work development. On the whole, students will be required to work as a team, or individually as needed, during this time. If students need to consult with the teacher, and the teacher is in her classroom, they may obtain a pass and report to her classroom. However, if they started the period in the Lions’ Den, they need to return to the Lions’ Den and check-out at the end of the period. This cycle can continue for the number of periods necessary as determined by the teacher. At the conclusion of the assignment, the teams will meet back in the classroom and provide the teacher with the full report, product, project, etc. The teams will be required to teach the other teams what they learned from the assignment. Students will be evaluated both as a team and individually on the project.

A few other operational issues exist with this program. AAT students will be provided with a special AAT photo ID that can be used to

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provide access to the Lions' Den during the class period. When students arrive at the Lions' Den, they will show their ID card, sign in and log the time. If they leave before the end of the period, they will be required to sign out, log the time and declare a destination. The Lions' Den director or assistant will be in charge of this process. While the students are in the Lions' Den, they will be required to work with their team or individually. The teams will work in designated work team areas. Individuals should work somewhere other than the work team areas. All of the students will have access to coffee, hot chocolate, hot tea and water for purchase in the Lions' Den Coffee Bar.

The efficacy of this program is already evident. AAT students have produced some wonderful products, demonstrated exceptional responsibility and cooperation, become more self-directed learners, engaged in successful interdisciplinary assignments, expressed excitement about the program, and improved their collaboration skills. We now have students requesting to be transferred into the AAT classes, and more teachers want to be trained and included as well. One of our AAT students had the following to say about the program: "As a young adult, having no direct supervision while completing our assignment was a successful tactic. In my opinion, this should be offered more. This teaches us responsibility and independence, which are two qualities we need in college." The feedback from our teachers has been extremely positive as well. For example, our AAT Dual-Credit English teacher, Linda Wensel, said the following: "I have to say I was amazed at the student response when I turned them loose with their first completely independent project.

It was more than difficult to send them to the Lion's Den and stay in my classroom, but they totally rose to the occasion. Their task was to create a website that dealt with "The Great Gatsby" and the roaring twenties. There were only three or four students out of all my classes that had any website building experience, so just that aspect was a challenge for almost everyone. The immediate response for many students was "we don't know how to create a website," but when I reminded them that was part of the challenge, they jumped on the task. I was amazed at their focus, their ingenuity, and how very quickly they bonded as a team, functioning as young adults without my intervention or guidance. Their behavior was completely different from previous and subsequent cooperative learning in the classroom where I am heavily monitoring." Other students and teachers in this program have expressed similar sentiments about their experiences. Consequently, we will continue to improve the existing program, and next year we will include some of our career and technology classes.

As educators, we know that our students must master the learning standards required by the Texas Education Agency and evaluated through the state assessment process. However, we also know that if our students expect to get employed and stay employed in jobs of their choice, they also must learn the social and teaming skills necessary to function in today's work environment. We believe that the effective utilization of Advanced Academic Teams will provide our students with that advantage in the job market and college classrooms.