

Leveraging Title I: A University-District Partnership to Improve K–12 Literacy

In an initiative designed to help teachers meet the Highly Qualified Teacher requirement of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act, the Arlington Independent School District (AISD) in Arlington, Texas has partnered with Texas Woman’s University (TWU) to offer a master’s degree in reading to any teachers working in Title I schools. This initiative is intended to help uncertified teachers gain state certification, qualify as “highly qualified,” and to attract highly qualified teachers to work in Title I schools in Arlington. The program began in 2001 and is funded with monies from Title I, a federal funding stream for schools with a concentration of low-income students.

Initially, the program offered several courses in early literacy and elementary literacy, and in the spring of 2004, developed into a partnership offering the TWU Reading Master’s Degree. Once teachers complete the master’s program, and if they have taught for at least three years, they are eligible to take the exam for the Texas All-Level Reading Specialist Certificate, which qualifies them for additional positions and compensation in some schools.

Teacher demand spurred the creation of additional course offerings focusing on *adolescent* literacy, beginning in 2005. In addition to helping teachers meet the “highly qualified” requirements, the adolescent literacy master’s courses are designed to train secondary teachers in effective literacy strategies and to create teachers who can become leaders in their schools in the area of literacy learning. Ultimately, the program and its participants are seeking to improve student achievement in all subject areas.

Thinking Outside the Title I Box—An Innovative Use of Funds

Prior to 2001, the Arlington School District took part in a literacy project with TWU that trained two classroom literacy facilitators to work with K–2 teachers to improve their literacy practices. As upper grades teachers witnessed the changes in these classrooms, they requested a similar program. The interest on the part of the teachers, coupled with the new demands on teacher certification brought about by NCLB, resulted in the partnership between AISD and TWU.

In the fall of 2002, TWU began offering “Reading Strategies for Intermediate Grade Readers” in Arlington. The tuition and books were fully funded through Title I for any interested teachers in Title I schools, but courses focused primarily on improving the reading skills of students in grades K–6. Despite this elementary focus, TWU found that several secondary teachers were taking part in the program. TWU and AISD then further developed the program so that teachers could earn their master’s degree through TWU. In 2004, in response to teacher interest, the university developed and began offering additional courses for teachers of grades 7–12.

TWU Master's in Reading

Students in the master's program take twenty-one credit hours of core course requirements, aligned with Texas' reading specialist standards and with the International Reading Association Standards for Reading Professionals. Nine additional credit hours are in a focus area of the student's choosing, of which adolescent literacy is one possibility. Students also complete a three to six credit hour research course. Taking one course per semester and two each summer, the program can be completed in as little as three years, while teaching. The district will also fund individual courses for teachers who are not planning on completing the master's program.

Nearly all courses are offered in Arlington on a rotating basis, so teachers in AISD can complete most of the master's program without having to commute to TWU, located an hour away. AISD provides the classroom space and pays the full cost for each course, approximately \$850 for tuition and books. Teachers are responsible for completing the course with a grade of A or B; if those conditions are not met, they must reimburse the district for the course costs. They are also obligated to continue teaching in AISD for three years after they finish the course. Upon completion of the master's degree, teachers are eligible for a \$1,500 annual stipend provided by the school district.

The master's program is based on a "theory-to-practice" model in which master's students are given assignments to complete in their own classrooms. All courses in the program emphasize teaching reading strategies and practices that support all readers, including struggling readers. The adolescent literacy courses highlight the work of researchers and practitioners who focus on literacy at the middle and high school level. This includes discussing methods of tapping into the out-of-school literacy practices of adolescents, such as the development of skills demonstrated in computer communication.

Positive Outcomes

One hundred and fifty AISD teachers have taken at least one course as part of the program, and twenty-eight of these are secondary literacy or subject area teachers—largely teachers of literacy, journalism, Spanish, or English—or literacy coaches who are trained to work with other teachers to improve their literacy practice. Teachers from three out of four eligible district middle schools have taken part, as well as from twenty-eight of twenty-nine eligible district elementary schools. The district's only eligible high school has a cohort of over twenty teachers who have taken at least one course in the program. None of the secondary teachers has yet completed a master's degree, but six elementary teachers have, and the program anticipates that several secondary teachers will complete their master's in the next few years.

An AISD policy prohibiting research in classrooms prevents measuring program effectiveness through an analysis of student test scores or reading improvement, so evaluating the impact of participating teachers on student learning is difficult. However, administrators and other teachers have observed and reported positive changes in teaching practice amongst those who completed the program, citing their innovations and enthusiasm. Several teachers have been asked to present to their schools and the district on their work.



The TWU-AISD partnership may provide an incentive for teachers to work in high-poverty schools. At least two teachers have requested transfer to Title I schools in order to take part in the program and several teachers who requested transfers from Title I schools asked to be moved only to other Title I schools.

Future Plans

TWU and AISD are working to increase the impact of their partnership through several initiatives. They are hoping to have ten to twelve teachers take the Master Reading Exam and earn qualification to do literacy coaching work with students and teachers in their schools. They are also seeking program funding for teachers who are not in Title I schools. TWU is interested in pursuing a grant with AISD to create a systematic districtwide plan to work with readers who struggle, using the master's as a basis for professional development.

Contact Information

Dr. Lettie K. Albright, Associate Professor of Reading, Texas Woman's University
Phone: (940) 898-2045
Email: lalbright@mail.twu.edu

Marsha Sanders, Reading Recovery Teacher Leader, Arlington Independent School District,
TWU Partnership Coordinator
Phone: (817) 801-4111
Email: msanders@aisd.net

