

**Report of the
Quality Assurance Review Team
for
South Texas Preparatory Academy**

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North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI) and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI) are accreditation divisions of AdvancED.

Quality Assurance Review Report

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About AdvancED and NCA CASI/SACS CASI

Background. Founded in 1895, the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI) and the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI) accredit public and private schools and districts in 30 states, the Navajo Nation, Latin America, and the Department of Defense Schools worldwide.

In April 2006, the North Central Association Commission on Accreditation and School Improvement (NCA CASI), the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Council on Accreditation and School Improvement (SACS CASI), and National Study of School Evaluation (NSSE) came together to form one strong unified organization dedicated to education quality. That unified organization, known as AdvancED, creates the world's largest education community, representing 27,000 public and private schools and districts across the United States and in 65 countries worldwide and educating 15 million students.

NCA CASI and SACS CASI serve as accreditation divisions of AdvancED. Through AdvancED, NCA CASI and SACS CASI have defined shared, research-based accreditation standards that cross state, regional, and national boundaries. Accompanying these standards is a unified accreditation process designed to help schools continuously improve.

The Accreditation Process. To earn and maintain accreditation from NCA CASI or SACS CASI, schools must:

- 1) Meet the AdvancED Standards and Policies for Quality Schools.** Schools demonstrate adherence to the AdvancED standards and policies which describe the quality practices and conditions that research and best practice indicate are necessary for schools to achieve quality student performance and organizational effectiveness.
- 2) Engage in continuous improvement.** Schools implement a continuous improvement process that articulates the vision and purpose the school is pursuing (vision); maintains a rich and current description of students, their performance, school effectiveness, and the school community (profile); employs goals and interventions to improve student performance (plan); and documents and uses the results to inform what happens next (results).
- 3) Demonstrate quality assurance through internal and external review.** Schools engage in a planned process of ongoing internal review and self-assessment. In addition, schools host an external Quality Assurance Review Team once every five years. The team evaluates the school's adherence to the AdvancED quality standards, assesses the efficacy of the school's improvement process and methods for quality assurance, and provides commendations and required actions to help the school improve. The team provides an oral exit report to the school and a written report detailing the team's required actions. The school acts on the team's required actions and submits a progress report following the review.

NCA CASI and SACS CASI accreditation engages the entire school community in a continuous process of self-evaluation and improvement. The overall aim is to help schools be the best they can be on behalf of the students they serve.

Introduction to the Quality Assurance Review

Purpose. The purpose of the Quality Assurance Review is to:

1. Evaluate the school's adherence to the AdvancED quality standards and policies.
2. Assess the efficacy of the school's improvement process and methods for quality assurance.
3. Identify commendations and required actions to improve the school.
4. Make an accreditation recommendation for review by the national AdvancED Accreditation Commission.

A key aim of the Quality Assurance Review is to verify that the school is operating with institutional integrity - that it is fulfilling its vision and mission for its students.

School Preparation. To prepare for the Quality Assurance Review, the school community engages in an in-depth self assessment of each of the seven AdvancED standards. The school identifies and describes the evidence that demonstrates that it is meeting each standard. Through this internal review, the school examines how its systems and processes contribute to student performance and school effectiveness.

Summary of Team Activities. The Quality Assurance Review Team is led by an AdvancED certified team chair and comprised of professionals from outside the school. The team reviews the findings of the school's internal self-assessment, conducts interviews with representative groups of stakeholders, reviews student performance data and other documentation provided by the school, and observes practices and daily operations. The team engages in professional deliberations to reach consensus on the school's adherence to the standards for accreditation. The team provides an oral exit report and prepares a written Quality Assurance Review Team Report designed to help the school improve.

The Quality Assurance Review Team Report. Following the visit, the review team completes the Quality Assurance Review report. After review by a nationally-trained reader, the report is submitted to the school. The report contains commendations and required actions for improvement.

Using the Report - Responding to the Required Actions. The school uses the report to guide its improvement efforts. The school is held accountable for addressing the required actions identified in the report. The NCA CASI/SACS CASI State Office is available to assist schools in addressing the required actions. At prescribed intervals, the school must submit a progress report detailing the actions and progress the school has made on the team's required actions. The report is reviewed at the state and national level to ensure the school is addressing the required actions.

Accreditation Recommendation. The Quality Assurance Review Team uses the findings from the onsite visit to make an accreditation recommendation that is reviewed at the state level and by the national AdvancED Accreditation Commission. Accreditation is granted by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission and communicated to the school following action from the commission.

Summary of Findings

A Quality Assurance Review Team representing the SACS CASI Texas State Office (SACS-CASI-TX), a division of AdvancED, visited the South Texas Preparatory Academy in Edinburg, Texas, United States on 02/24/2011 - 02/25/2011.

During the visit, members of the Quality Assurance Review Team interviewed 2 members of the administrative team, 16 students, 11 parents, and 35 teachers. In addition, 2 Counselors, 2 Librarians and 2 Clerks were interviewed. The team also reviewed documents, student performance data, and other artifacts provided by the school. Specifically, the team examined the school's systems and processes in relation to the seven AdvancED standards:

1. Vision and Purpose
2. Governance and Leadership
3. Teaching and Learning
4. Documenting and Using Results
5. Resource and Support Systems
6. Stakeholder Communications and Relationships
7. Commitment to Continuous Improvement

The AdvancED standards focus on systems within a school and systematic methods of attaining high student performance and organizational effectiveness. The power of the standards lies in the connections and linkages between and among the standards. The Quality Assurance Review Team used the AdvancED standards to guide its review of the school, looking not only for adherence to individual standards, but also for how the school functions as a whole and embodies the practices and characteristics of a quality school.

Through its examination of the school's adherence to the standards, the Quality Assurance Review Team identified the following commendations and required actions.

Commendations

The Quality Assurance Review Team commends the school for the following strengths and accomplishments. While additional strengths are noted in the detailed review of each standard that appears later in this report, the commendations listed below are the strengths that the team believes are most deserving of being highlighted.

- **The school is fostering a safe, nurturing environment with programs that challenge junior high students and encourage them to be responsible and caring young citizens. Diversity is celebrated and inclusion is promoted.**

The Quality Assurance Review (QAR) team finds through interviews and observations that the curriculum is rigorous and teachers hold high expectations for themselves and students. Parents indicate that the culture of the campus is student centered. Students say they are “happy, feel cared about, and safe, and are supported by teachers and leadership while at the same time being expected to achieve at high levels.” Observations reveal that students are well-behaved, extremely respectful of their peers and teachers, and engaged in learning.

Through a strong support system and positive teacher and administrative leadership, students understand expectations and perform accordingly.

- **Cutting-edge technology is prevalent throughout the campus and used extremely effectively as an instructional tool. Teachers are well trained and enthusiastic about increasing their technology knowledge so that they can expand learning opportunities through multimedia. Usage is aligned with instructional expectations.**

Interviews and observations reveal a campus where technology is embraced and teachers are leading the way to provide resources and assistance that pave a path for students to be prepared for the “next generation of technical advances.”

Because teachers are willing to learn new techniques, expand their knowledge base, and be “risk-takers,” technology plays a powerful role in teaching and learning.

- **The school is effectively implementing the concept of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) which has formalized the process of aligning instructional practices with curriculum, expanded the spirit of collegiality and collaboration, and encouraged shared leadership and decision making.**

The QAR team learns through interviews, observations, and a review of artifacts that teachers are trained to understand the value of PLCs. Together they unite to ensure that the concept succeeds on campus. This has occurred through a very positive process that teachers have readily embraced and implemented.

By utilizing a process that allows teachers to actively engage in collaboration, ownership and buy-in are realized; and a positive environment is created and sustained.

- **The school leadership has created a culture that engenders positive relationships, transparency, and trust where stakeholders feel valued and supported, where high expectations are the norm, and where a philosophy of empowerment is shared. A sense of family permeates the school.**

Teachers praise the principal for creating an atmosphere where collaboration and shared leadership are encouraged and learning is maximized. The principal is described as a “servant leader” who models positive behavior and an energetic commitment to excellence. Opportunities for shared decision making are evident in the structure of the Site Based Decision-Making Team (SBDM) and other organizations where teachers have meaningful roles.

A learning community that promotes leadership and empowers its teachers creates an environment where positive change can evolve.

Required Actions

In addition to the commendations, the Quality Assurance Review Team identified the following required actions for improvement. The team focused its required actions on those areas that, if addressed, will have the greatest impact on improving student performance and overall school effectiveness. The school will be held accountable for addressing each of the required actions noted in this section. Following this review, the school will be asked to submit a progress report on these required actions.

- **Institute a comprehensive data system that ensures that all teachers assess student performance and**

determine interventions to improve both individual and group achievement. Investigate ways to broaden this focus among all disciplines.

The QAR team finds that the academic teams that represent core subjects are involved at different stages in disaggregating data and using this information to inform instruction as well as to develop interventions. This process is more limited in the non-core areas and should be increased so that students understand the importance of their success in all courses and are aware of their progress in all subjects at all times. Consistency is a vital component of using data effectively.

By embedding the use of data in all teaching and learning then sharing that information with all students in a timely manner, achievement can be sustained more readily.

- **Build the capacity for student involvement in the intervention process by making students active participants in assessing their own strengths and needs.**

The QAR team determines that students are very engaged in their learning and maintain academic focus because of strong teacher support. By adding a component of student self-reflection and assessment, achievement can be further extended as students analyze their own needs and are encouraged to be solution oriented.

Through active self-assessment and discovery, students can be involved in helping to design their own interventions and thus learn problem-solving skills and proactive techniques to address weaknesses.

Review of AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools: The team reviewed the school's adherence to each of the AdvancED standards. The findings from this review are provided in the next section of this report.

Next Steps

The school should:

1. Review and discuss the findings from this report with all stakeholders.
2. Ensure that plans are in place to embed and sustain the strengths noted in the commendations section to maximize their impact on the school.
3. Develop action plans to address the required actions made by the team. Include methods for monitoring progress toward the required actions.
4. Use the report to guide and strengthen the school's efforts to improve student performance and school effectiveness.
5. Following the Quality Assurance Review, submit the Accreditation Progress Report detailing progress made toward addressing the required actions. The report will be reviewed at the state and national level to ensure that significant progress is being made toward the required actions. Lack of progress can result in a change in accreditation status.
6. Continue to meet the AdvancED accreditation standards, submit required reports, engage in continuous improvement, and document results.

Resources

AdvancED offers a range of resources to support your school as it acts on the findings in this report. The AdvancED Resource Network, available at www.advanc-ed.org/resourcenetwork, provides an online network of peer-to-peer practices, best practices, and resources and tools designed to help schools with their improvement

efforts. Available any where, any time, the network can be queried for information on a variety of school improvement subjects. The AdvancED Research and Development division provides research, handbooks, and tools to assist schools with continuous improvement. In addition, your state office provides hands-on professional development and ongoing technical assistance. Contact your state office for more information on the range of resources available to you.

Celebrating Accreditation

Following the visit, the Quality Assurance Review Team submits an accreditation recommendation to AdvancED for state review and for action at the national level by the AdvancED Accreditation Commission, which confers accreditation and communicates it to the school. Upon receiving its accreditation, the school should celebrate its achievement with the school community. The SACS-CASI-TX accreditation seals are available at www.advanced.org/communicationskit for accredited schools and districts to post on their website and to use in school communications. Flags, door decals, diploma seals, and lapel pins are also available and can be ordered from the website to help you share your accomplishment with your community.

Summary

The accreditation process engages the school in an ongoing journey of continuous improvement. The next steps in this journey are to build on the strengths and address the required actions noted in this report. Doing so will enable the school to advance in its quest for excellence and deepen the fulfillment of its mission for all students.

Review of AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools

The primary requirement for accreditation is that the South Texas Preparatory Academy demonstrates that it meets the seven standards for accreditation. The findings of the Quality Assurance Review Team regarding the standards for accreditation are summarized on the following pages.

Standard 1. Vision and Purpose

Standard: The school establishes and communicates a shared purpose and direction for improving the performance of students and the effectiveness of the school.

Description - The team noted how the school met the intent of the standard based on the preponderance of evidence:

In keeping with its pledge to embrace the Professional Learning Community (PLC) process, the vision of the school was developed by the Site Based Decision-Making Committee (SBDM), comprised of staff, students, parents, and community stakeholders. The statement, a recent revision of the original, reads, “The South Texas Preparatory Academy (STPA) community promotes successful students by focusing on learning, working together, and being accountable for results.” Interviews reveal that the leadership and teachers worked together for two years before finally coming to agreement on a vision statement that truly reflects what they all strive for and believe. Due to its newness, it is still not fully embedded in the school culture; however, it is evident that the leadership is working to remedy this through a series of efforts including dialogue, surveys, and more visible postings

Aligned with the mission statement, “STPA serves to challenge students with an engaging curriculum to prepare them for future learning,” the implementation of the vision reflects a young campus of only three years intent on being an exemplary magnet campus for junior high students. . The school has programs in place to communicate the mission and vision to stakeholders; this includes a mandatory academic session where parents of potential students learn about the purpose of the school and how the vision affects their children. Both statements are displayed on the website, in newsletters, and in posters around the school.

With open enrollment, the school reflects the makeup of the South Texas area it serves. The student population is 75 percent Hispanic with almost 53 percent of the students economically disadvantaged. The teaching staff mirrors this composition. Due to the uniqueness of the school and its sister schools in the Rio Grande Valley, maintaining a rich profile is extremely important because students represent three counties and 28 school districts; this creates challenges for communications, transportation, scheduling, and programming. Nevertheless, since becoming an independent campus in 2008, seventh-grade scores in writing, reading, and math have steadily increased to the point that on the 2010 Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), passing rates are 100 percent, 96 percent and 94 percent, respectively. Results for eighth graders are similar. The number of TAKS Commended Students has risen significantly also. Interviews reveal that stakeholders are proud of the school’s diverse and inclusive student population and the manner in which students treat each other with respect and build strong friendships. Parents and teachers say differences are celebrated rather than just tolerated.

To build stakeholder understanding of the school’s common purpose, collaborative teams meet regularly and use assessments and other data to implement curricular change, to develop and/or modify instructional strategies, and to improve school programs. As a result of the ongoing sharing of ideas, the campus

improvement plan is updated with relevant changes that enhance the organizational effectiveness of the school.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- The number of Texas Education Agency (TEA) Commended Students has increased markedly over the last two years.
- Teachers were extremely involved in the development of the vision, and their input was honored.
- All stakeholders groups say there is a sense of family and community, and that everyone embraces and celebrates the diversity of the campus.

Opportunities - The team offers the following opportunities for improvement for consideration by the school:

- Ensure that the mission and new vision are truly embedded in the culture of the school.

Finding: South Texas Preparatory Academy has earned the overall assessment level of "Operational" and has met this standard for accreditation.

Standard 2. Governance and Leadership

Standard: The school provides governance and leadership that promote student performance and school effectiveness.

Description - The team noted how the school met the intent of the standard based on the preponderance of evidence:

The leadership of the school employs a system that provides for analysis and review of overall student performance and organizational effectiveness while operating in compliance with policies, procedures, and laws established by the state of Texas, the South Texas I.S.D. Board of Trustees, and the federal government. There is evidence to show the necessary handbooks, policy manuals, extracurricular activity rules, and other important documents are available to stakeholders and are also being followed by teachers and administrators.

Leadership at the school is both transformational and facilitative with a focus on empowering teachers through ongoing collaboration. The administrative team, along with assistance from various advisory teams, guide school improvement. Teachers describe the principal as supportive, approachable, and focused with a vision for establishing a truly functional professional learning community where teachers hold meaningful leadership roles. One faculty member said the principal is a “servant leader” and has modeled this so that others have joined in this approach.

The SBDM team is an important structure on the campus. All suggestions made by stakeholders are brought to this group and analyzed, discussed, and acted upon with final approval given by the principal. Since members of the various departmental teams are also representatives on this committee, it is their task to disseminate information to their departments and return to the SBDM with input and feedback. The student ambassador program is praised by both teachers and students as an outstanding forum for student involvement and leadership. There is no longer a student council, so the team recommends that this be considered as an additional opportunity for students.

To provide additional input and sharing, department leaders meet weekly with the administration to address and act upon topics relating to curriculum and instruction. Departmental collaborative teams and the interdisciplinary academic teams meet to discuss student achievement and to develop strategies to teach across subject matters and to address needs of struggling students.

Professional development has primarily focused on the PLC model and Laying the Foundation methodology, but other trainings have been made available. All core teachers have received specialized training for teaching gifted and talented students as well as for those students who have limited English proficiency. Reflection and discussion about professional growth are part of the Teacher Self-Report. Plans are to implement a professional development e-file portfolio to assist staff in seeking out and planning individual and group professional growth. The administration further indicates that plans are to involve teachers to a greater degree in the development of future faculty handbooks so that they become a more useful resource.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- Teachers and administrators are committed to embedding PLC concepts into the culture of the school. Teachers indicate that the PLC is an easy “fit” for the campus because everyone embraces the components and implements them wisely.
- Teachers are extremely collaborative. The faculty is united in a common purpose, and all stakeholder groups indicate there is a strong sense of family and community. Morale is high among the staff.
- The principal demonstrates exceptional leadership attributes and is described as focused and supportive as well as knowledgeable about best practices.
- The SBDM and teaming allow teachers to serve in meaningful roles and provided valued input and feedback.

Opportunities - The team offers the following opportunities for improvement for consideration by the school:

- Investigate the possibility of forming a student council to promote more student leadership opportunities.

Finding: South Texas Preparatory Academy has earned the overall assessment level of "Highly Functional" and has met this standard for accreditation.

Standard 3. Teaching and Learning

Standard: The school provides research-based curriculum and instructional methods that facilitate achievement for all students.

Description - The team noted how the school met the intent of the standard based on the preponderance of evidence:

The school has developed and implemented a rigorous curriculum in the four core subject areas that are based on clearly-defined expectations for student learning. Teachers of elective courses are working to enhance their curriculum which will support the core initiatives. Some departments have aligned the essential learning outcomes with the scope and sequence and merged them into one document that has been reviewed at the district level to ensure the alignment of the curriculum with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and Pre-Advance Placement (Pre-AP). The principal indicates that she anticipates that all departments will eventually accomplish these tasks to ensure that all students have the same learning opportunities in similarly challenging curricula. The QAR team determines that this should be a requirement in order to promote consistency and recommends that a timeline be developed to address completion.

Through collaboration, there appears to be strong articulation and alignment between and among all levels of schools. Academic teaming appears to be a cornerstone of the instructional program. Teachers indicate that teaming works extremely well not only for students but also for parents because it enables them to conference with the whole team in a timely manner. Common planning time is another helpful tool which has inspired collaboration, and next year this will be further enhanced with all core teachers having common planning time in their disciplines. Because there are many topics discussed during planning, the team knows that time for curriculum development is sometimes limited. By reviewing the planning schedule, modifications could be made to allow for specified formal curriculum development.

Teams have developed common formative assessments in all subjects. Resulting data are disaggregated and shared collaboratively to assist teachers with the implementation of curriculum and modification of teaching strategies. Additionally, from interviews with teachers, the QAR team finds that teachers appear to understand that formative assessments are valuable tools for identifying strengths and weaknesses of individual students as well as entire classes. Team members also share and discuss the data to plan instruction and develop interventions. Teachers indicate that they are encouraged to research best practices. They use time to reflect on their teaching and how it can be improved.

To promote active involvement of students, teachers plan and implement opportunities to focus on higher-order thinking skills. Examples of this were seen in student projects and presentations as well as in general classroom discussions. The QAR team finds, however, that some teachers are doing this better than others, so opportunities for all students to explore application of Bloom's Taxonomy should be further emphasized and monitored.

The staff has been proactive in learning about and integrating new technology into classroom technology. Teachers indicate that they have embraced technology and are "not afraid" to use it in all aspects of instruction. Observations reveal this to be the case with both students and teachers actively engaged in using technology as a learning tool. All staff members are offered opportunities to advance technological skills through weekly trainings, on-line tutorials, professional development, and collaboration. Teachers are required to evaluate their individual skills and knowledge through a technology proficiency survey. Moreover, the school requires students to take technology applications and/or gateway to technology

courses. Technology also extends from the school to the home through the use of Blackboard and Infinite Campus. Some labs are available for parent use, and students have the opportunity to take home laptops and other equipment on a check-out basis.

Observations reveal that instructional time is protected by using modified schedules when special events occur by using dedicated announcement times and limiting interruptions. Bell-to-bell instruction is occurring in most classrooms, but this should continue to be a goal for every teacher all of the time.

The team found the library to be a very centralized and strong part of the instructional program where students are encouraged to “get wrapped up in a good book.” Numerous resources are available for teachers and students both on-line and in traditional forms.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- Teachers are able to articulate the importance of formative assessments.
- Observations reveal a high level of engagement by a majority of the students, and instruction is student- centered.
- The faculty has embraced technology and all teachers appear to be using it to maximize student learning. Technology training is prevalent, and teachers enthusiastically talk about how much they are learning about technology and how they are making learning more relevant by integrating it into daily instruction.
- Librarians are very involved in teaching and learning, and it is evident through observations and a review of the artifacts that students find the library a welcoming place to read, research, and utilize technology.

Opportunities - The team offers the following opportunities for improvement for consideration by the school:

- Ensure that all teachers are aligning the essential learning outcomes with the scope and sequence and merging them into one document as a complement to the curriculum.
- Endeavor to protect instructional time one hundred percent of the time by ensuring bell-to-bell instruction is occurring.
- Review planning time schedules to allow for more curriculum development and dialogue.

Finding: South Texas Preparatory Academy has earned the overall assessment level of "Highly Functional" and has met this standard for accreditation.

Standard 4. Documenting and Using Results

Standard: The school enacts a comprehensive assessment system that monitors and documents performance and uses these results to improve student performance and school effectiveness.

Description - The team noted how the school met the intent of the standard based on the preponderance of evidence:

Student performance and other important data are used to guide decisions regarding curriculum, instruction, and overall school programs. Data is analyzed and used to inform instruction and enhance student performance. This is especially true in the core subjects, but is not as prevalent across all non-core courses. This prevents a thorough examination of multiple types of data in order to make comparisons across groups to facilitate critical dialogue for improvement. The team notes that all teachers need to be focused on ensuring that assessment data is available to all students so that they understand their individual strengths and weaknesses. Also, because the campus is relatively new, trend data is limited. Leadership appears to understand these weaknesses and is working to eliminate the problems. This is evident in the development of a series of assessments, including common formative ones, which are reviewed for validity, reliability, and lack of bias. Because students are actively engaged in their learning and appear very motivated, the team notes that some type of student self-assessment or reflection tool might further enhance their involvement and lead to even more student achievement.

Academic teams and departments meet regularly to collaborate, intervene, and provide support. Teachers evaluate test questions in order to arrive at consensus regarding their usefulness and application. To further ensure lack of bias, teacher use assessment measures that have been previously certified as valid and reliable. These include released TAKS tests and publisher-provided question banks and test generators. Students in special populations have testing accommodations and/or modifications. Teachers regularly communicate assessment data to parents and encourage them to use Blackboard, The Spartan Messenger, Infinite Campus, conferences, emails, and telephone calls to stay abreast of their child's learning patterns. Observations reveal that teachers go above and beyond to provide information on Blackboard so that students can review and extend assignments and parents can stay current on class requirements. A secure, accurate, and complete student records system is maintained in accordance with state and federal regulations.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- Blackboard is used extensively as an instructional tool that enhances learning and involves parents in the process.
- Academic teams meet often to discuss student data and to lend support.

Opportunities - The team offers the following opportunities for improvement for consideration by the school:

- Develop a comprehensive data system that allows for the examination of multiple types of data to make comparisons across groups both in core and non-core subjects. Begin analyzing trend data.
- Ensure that assessment data is readily available to all students and that they are aware of their individual strengths and weaknesses.
- Investigate the possibility of adding a student self-assessment tool in the teaching and learning process.

Finding: South Texas Preparatory Academy has earned the overall assessment level of "Operational" and has met this standard for accreditation.

Standard 5. Resource and Support Systems

Standard: The school has the resources and services necessary to support its vision and purpose and to ensure achievement for all students.

Description - The team noted how the school met the intent of the standard based on the preponderance of evidence:

The school has 100% of all teachers who are certified as Highly Qualified under No Child Left Behind (NCLB) in their subject areas. The teacher retention rate is high. Teacher and staff competency is ensured through observation and evaluation of job performance. Additionally, there is a teacher/mentor program in place to ascertain that new teachers are supported adequately. One of the school's goals is to strengthen the mentor preparation program by extending professional development for experienced staff and lengthening the period of follow-up shadowing of the the new teachers.

Teachers are strategically placed in classroom assignments to match student criteria. Based on need as evidenced in data, the school has added and modified facilities to accommodate growth and instructional needs. There is a process in place that begins with discussion, evaluation, and implementation of space assignments. This ensures that these changes are predicated on student needs. For example, some teachers were relocated to improve departmental collaboration.

A budgetary process is in place to determine where funds and resources will be allocated. In the spring administration directs department leaders to conduct a needs assessment of their department for the following school year. These assessments are then used to request funds through the budgetary process. School leaders from each campus meet as a group with the district leadership to justify their budgetary requests. Throughout the school year reallocation of available funds is made based on teacher/student needs. The budget is presented to SBDM at the first meeting for the year and is also discussed at the department leaders' meeting. They in turn are asked to share with all other department members. A campus and district system is in place for review and approval of the expenditure of resources.

Furthermore, there are systems in place to meet the needs of all stakeholders in the academic community. For examples, the school's crisis management plan was developed with input from various stakeholders, e.g., parents, staff, fire marshal, and students. Students and staff receive training on a regular basis to ensure safety. Each classroom is equipped with an exit route diagram, an emergency folder (which includes a crisis plan), and an emergency/lock-down kit. The team notes that attention should be given to checking unlocked electrical boxes and other maintenance issues such as air conditioning compressors that are not protected from students. Security cameras, however, are in place to monitor activity. Teachers are assigned duty stations to enforce safety and order.

Additionally, a strong counseling program is available to students for mentoring, referral, and career planning. Counselors are readily accessible and willing to help students resolve concerns and problems. One counselor works with eighth-grade students throughout the year to prepare them for high school. A counselor moves up a grade level each year with the students through junior high which is beneficial to all students. In addition to the school counselors, a district-provided wellness counselor is available on

campus to provide services to students with extraordinary needs. A student-based mentoring program, Kick-off Mentor Program (KOM), was adopted this year to assist incoming students' transition into the school.

The identification of students with special needs begins with the Student Review Team (SRT) process. Teachers, counselors, or parents initiate this process through a referral. The team meets to discuss, evaluate, and develop an appropriate intervention plan based on an individual student's academic or behavioral needs. This intervention plan is provided through the SRT, the 504 committee, or the Admissions, Review, Dismissal) ARD committee. Changes are made to the plans based on individual student needs. Numerous support systems are in place to provide assistance to students academically, socially, and emotionally. In interviews, students say they feel "really cared about" by their teachers, counselors, and administrators. The team finds the school culture to be very nurturing while at the same time instilling high standards and expectations.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- A strong support system is in place to address student needs as well as to provide assistance and accommodations. Counselors are engaged in helping students make a smooth transition to junior high and find their niche.
- Teachers, all highly qualified, are very involved in the budgeting and planning process. Resource allocation is based on student instructional needs and program requirements.

Opportunities - The team offers the following opportunities for improvement for consideration by the school:

- Review maintenance issues throughout the school plant.

Finding: South Texas Preparatory Academy has earned the overall assessment level of "Operational" and has met this standard for accreditation.

Standard 6. Stakeholder Communications and Relationships

Standard: The school fosters effective communications and relationships with and among its stakeholders.

Description - The team noted how the school met the intent of the standard based on the preponderance of evidence:

The school uses a variety of means to communicate to stakeholders. These include progress reports (every three weeks) and report cards (every nine weeks), school newsletter, district newsletter, student orientation, parent connections, phone calls, emails, conferences, websites, and standard mailings. The school report card and Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) report are posted on the school website. For example, as part of the Student Success Initiative, parents of any eighth grade student who does not master the reading and/or the math TAKS test are contacted to discuss a plan of action prior to the second and third administrations of the assessments. Parents of students who are in danger of being retained are informed of their children's lack of academic progress and are provided with the proper guidance to assist the student to ensure success. Additionally, teachers contact parents on a regular basis to inform them of student progress.

The leadership actively seeks stakeholder input into new programs and improvement initiatives. The library staff coordinates for authors to make presentations to students. Community representatives are invited to present to students on a monthly basis through The Brown Bag Luncheons. Teachers also invite speakers to their classrooms. The social worker coordinates parental connection sessions with different speakers and parent book studies throughout the year. The SBDM members include a business and community representative. Field trips are planned in coordination with community organizations that support student learning and civic responsibility.

Additionally, the school has implemented a school website and email system that is accessible to all stakeholders. Community members, for example, are encouraged to state their concerns in the Parent, Student, Teacher Organization (PSTO) meetings, as well as district-wide parental-involvement sessions. Student performance is also posted on the district online grade-reporting system called Infinite Campus through which parents and students have access to view grades, attendance, and discipline reports. The School Report Card is mailed yearly to parents as well as being posted on the school website. In addition, parents are offered interpretative assistance through a district-level meeting for this purpose. The principal presents the AEIS report to parents at a yearly meeting as well. Teachers post and maintain curriculum and assignments on Blackboard with is available to parents and students.

Parents are also invited through the school newsletter to participate in school activities. Individual teachers poll their students concerning parents' areas of expertise and invite them to take part in the educational process when appropriate. Additionally, parents of newly-enrolled students are required to attend a Parent Advisement Session at which the school's policies and procedures are presented. During the session, parents and students sign a Compact of Shared Responsibilities delineating the school's purpose, goals, and expectations. Parents monitor their student's assignments through the use of student agendas/planners. Parents have the opportunity to attend the parent connection sessions which serve as an option for parents to network and share their knowledge with each other and the school community. Despite serving three counties, the school has high levels of participation in parent/family activities. The diverse socio-economic and cultural makeup of the school's population is reflected in the attendees to the school's events and programs. Parent connection meetings are held in different areas of the Valley to facilitate parental participation. Surveys are also used to gather parent input, but more emphasis should be given to increase the rate of return. Most presentations and literature are offered in bilingual format.

School leadership has mailings every three weeks. The Spartan Messenger gives parents important information about activities at school. Through this newsletter counselors and administration occasionally remind parents of the many educational resources available to them. Other literature, as well as the school website, offers similar communications. Teachers maintain an online class through Blackboard which provides parents and students with updated information about the students' courses including dates of assessments, notes, handouts, and activities.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- Parent connection meetings are held in different parts of the area the school serves in an effort to take the "school to the community." This has successfully encouraged parent participation.
- Teachers are dedicated to keeping parents informed through phone calls and emails and try to give communications a "personal touch."
- Leadership endeavors to include parents in program planning and initiatives as well as to provide them with meaningful roles on committees.

Opportunities - The team offers the following opportunities for improvement for consideration by the

school:

- Increase the rate of return of parent surveys.

Finding: South Texas Preparatory Academy has earned the overall assessment level of "Operational" and has met this standard for accreditation.

Standard 7. Commitment to Continuous Improvement

Standard: The school establishes, implements, and monitors a continuous process of improvement that focuses on student performance.

Description - The team noted how the school met the intent of the standard based on the preponderance of evidence:

Prior to the start of the school year, leadership meets with department leaders to disseminate the expectations for the upcoming school year. The principal develops specific, measurable, attainable, realistic, and timely (SMART) goals which have been formulated from the previous year's observations, recommendations, and survey results. During staff development days the campus improvement plan is presented to the faculty and staff for discussion, review, and revision to help attain a consensus on its content. This ultimately assists in establishing a set of goals that provides the campus with focused direction. Each department/academic team establishes its own set of goals that are aligned with the school's vision, campus plan, and student state assessment results; this information leads to a plan of action on how best to facilitate and increase student success.

At the school stakeholders are informed of the school improvement process through various means including PSTO meetings, parent meetings, school website, and newsletters. Stakeholders have the opportunity to contribute to the school improvement process through the SBDM committee. This improvement plan includes components which address clubs and activities that enhance student participation beyond the classroom. As the school matures, the QAR team determines that more emphasis should be given to expanding enrichment activities; the "flex" schedule mentioned appears to be an excellent avenue to accomplish this.

Surveys are used to gain student and parent feedback which helps guide the improvement process. Parents express their individual thoughts or concerns which are taken into consideration in the revision of the campus plan. An emphasis on getting more surveys returned is needed, however. Input from the student ambassadors is also welcomed.

Another factor in continuous improvement is professional development. Faculty members are given many opportunities to grow as professionals through staff development. Individual teachers, as well as teams, suggest staff development training based on the needs of students. For example, teachers attend training in PLC, scheduled training in Laying the Foundation and weekly technology training.

Collaborative teams collect and analyze data to modify instruction and use interventions to ensure the improvement of student success. Department leaders meet to discuss strategies to improve school programs. Furthermore, administration uses data from snapshots to facilitate improvement.

The school and district have an on-going process for evaluating achievement of stated goals. This process includes collection and analysis of data by collaborative teams who then reflect on and share ideas of best

practices for improving student performance. On an on-going basis, collaborative teams use evaluation data to modify instruction, curriculum, and programs. The results of this ongoing evaluation and modification process form the basis for revision to the early evaluation of and changes to the campus improvement plan. The QAR team finds teachers and leadership to be purposeful and collaborative in all planning as the campus evolves into a strong junior high serving students in three counties representing numerous school districts. In less than three years, the school has established a positive reputation and has made great strides in student achievement. Because the school is relatively new, public relations efforts must continue so that more parents and students in South Texas know and understand the outstanding opportunities that this school holds for them.

Strengths - The team noted the following successful practices deserving of recognition:

- The school has an organized, focused plan for continuous improvement that includes involvement of all stakeholder groups.
- Collaboration is apparent, and best practices are utilized in the improvement process.

Opportunities - The team offers the following opportunities for improvement for consideration by the school:

- Give careful attention to the proposed “flex” schedule or some type of provision so that more enrichment or club offerings can be provided to students.
- Expand public relations efforts to further boost the school’s positive image.

Finding: South Texas Preparatory Academy has earned the overall assessment level of "Highly Functional" and has met this standard for accreditation.

Conclusion

The commendations and required actions in this report are designed to focus the school on those areas that will have the greatest impact on student performance and school effectiveness. While powerful in potential, the commendations and required actions only have meaning when acted upon by the school. The strength of this report lies in the school's commitment to using the findings to continuously improve. The key is action. The school is encouraged to use the report as a call to action, a tool to sustain momentum in the ongoing process of continuous improvement.

The team identified required actions for improvement that the school will need to address. Following this review, the school will be required to submit a progress report summarizing its progress toward addressing the team's required actions.

The Quality Assurance Review Team expresses appreciation to the School Administration, members of the professional staff, students, parents and other community representatives for their hospitality throughout the visit. The team wishes the school and its students much success in the quest for excellence through SACS-CASI-TX accreditation with AdvancED.

Appendix

Quality Assurance Review Team Members

- Dr. Cindy Bradford, CHAIR
- Mr. Arnaldo Benavides, MEMBER (Freddy Gonzalez Elementary School)
- Mr. Hector Madrigal, MEMBER
- Mr. Jose Farias, MEMBER

AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools

The AdvancED Standards for Quality Schools are comprehensive statements of quality practices and conditions that research and best practice indicate are necessary for schools to achieve quality student performance and organizational effectiveness. As schools reach higher levels of implementation of the standards, they will have a greater capacity to support ever-increasing student performance and organizational effectiveness. Each of the seven standards listed below has corresponding indicators and impact statements which can be accessed at www.advanc-ed.org.

Vision and Purpose

The school establishes and communicates a shared purpose and direction for improving the performance of students and the effectiveness of the school.

Governance and Leadership

The school provides governance and leadership that promote student performance and school effectiveness.

Teaching and Learning

The school provides research-based curriculum and instructional methods that facilitate achievement for all students.

Documenting and Using Results

The school enacts a comprehensive assessment system that monitors and documents performance and uses these results to improve student performance and school effectiveness.

Resource and Support Systems

The school has the resources and services necessary to support its vision and purpose and to ensure achievement for all students.

Stakeholder Communications and Relationships

The school fosters effective communications and relationships with and among its stakeholders.

Commitment to Continuous Improvement

The school establishes, implements, and monitors a continuous process of improvement that focuses on student performance.