



Excellence committee wrangles best practices across Texas and drives them home

By Raven L. Hill



Since its creation in 2003, Kerrville ISD's Academic Excellence Committee (AEC) has focused on making the best even better. The committee spends each school year researching best practices in programs and curriculum offerings in schools across the state, culminating with recommendations to the Kerrville ISD Board of Trustees each May.

Dan Troxell created the committee shortly after taking his post as Kerrville ISD's superintendent. His goal was to find additional offerings for the district's gifted and talented program. In the years since its creation, however, the AEC has grown beyond that narrow focus to identify programs and resources that could enrich students at all levels. The AEC is comprised of a broad swath of district stakeholders — students, teachers, parents, administrators, school board members and Kerrville residents — approximately 50 participants in all.

The best part of the AEC, Troxell says, is that all stakeholders feel like their voices are heard.

"Anytime that you are able to bring various stakeholders to a common meeting where they can work on concerns that impact students, you're going to have outstanding results," he says.

Committee work begins each September when Troxell outlines the year's issues of study. Five to seven subcommittees, consisting of eight to 10 people each, are formed. Troxell encourages them to think big, boldly and wildly—but realistically.

The committee's charge varies from year to year, but some issues remain constant. For instance, there are standing subcommittees for:

- improving math and science scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills

- student leadership
- technology, and
- gifted and talented programs.

A few years ago, the AEC sought ways to increase the number of students taking Advanced Placement courses and passing the AP exams. During the 2002-2003 school year, only 43 students took AP exams; even fewer passed AP tests. Committee members visited other districts to get a closer look at AP incentive programs, as well as successful partnerships with education foundations and businesses.

"We ended up doing programs that were tried, true and tested in other districts," Troxell says.

During the 2008-2009 school year, the number of students taking AP courses and passing AP exams had more than quadrupled, Troxell says.

This year, among other tasks, the AEC is charged with finding ways to reduce the number of special education referrals and to identify methods to better assist students with limited English proficiency.

Campus principals and central office administrators invite people to serve on the AEC. The first committee consisted of 30 people, but as many as 80 have served in some years. About a quarter of the committee members are new each year.

The AEC is geared toward academic improvement with what the superintendent calls "laser-like precision." When looking for best practices, the committee looks far and wide, from small and rural districts to large urban systems — and all sizes in between.



Superintendent Dan Troxell

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Expanding the scope

Following referrals provided by the AEC over the years, Kerrville ISD has added orchestra, after-school elementary Spanish lessons and Air Force JROTC. The district also has forged a partnership with a local community college to increase the number of graduates moving on to higher education.

Elementary school “challenge labs,” which offer independent study and unique learning opportunities, are another proud addition to Kerrville ISD schools, thanks to the AEC.



Cheryl Rich

Students can work on their own in a Challenge Lab after they’ve mastered an objective in the classroom, but there are also programs set up

for group activities. Nimitz Elementary School teacher Cheryl Rich, who served on the AEC in its first year, leads a poetry project for third graders who are reading above average. For students in the gifted and talented program, she hosts a weekly “lunch bunch,” in which students discuss making friends, taking responsibility for their actions and other topics designed to aid in social and emotional development.

Rich says the challenge labs add value to the whole school.

“We don’t have any discipline problems in the lab, because the students work really hard to come here. It raises the bar for everyone in the school,” she says. “They have to earn the right to come by their performance.”

Yet, not all best practices uncovered by the AEC are made available to Kerrville ISD’s 4,800 students. The committee decided against implementing AVID, a college prep program for middle and high school students

after concerns arose about whether it could be uniformly implemented. Moreover, an idea for an online enrichment program was nixed after the committee identified an equally good — and less expensive — alternative.



Jennifer Lord



A second grader in Cheryl Rich’s class at Nimitz Elementary School takes a water sample in the school courtyard for a Challenge Lab experiment on the water cycle.

Jennifer Lord, a third grade teacher at Daniels Elementary, has served on the AEC since it started. She says it’s one of the district’s most powerful tools. Along with being visionary, the committee fosters a sense of collaboration among colleagues, she says.

According to Lord, it’s one of the few times when educators can see how mastery of the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills plays out from grade to grade.

“[We discover that] if we can fix some areas in the lower grades, it has a ripple effect,” she says.



Deb Wells

The committee also reinforces a sense of shared leadership, rather following a top-down approach, says Deb Wells, assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction. She chairs several subcommittees.

“The responsibilities we have in a public school system are so tremendous that you can no longer rely on one person to provide leadership,” Wells says. “You have to rely on a shared system — your strongest teachers and principals, your most

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involved parents — and the AEC is a result of that philosophy.”



Ellen Williams

Most all recommendations have been successful and received well by the Kerrville community because they had a say in it, says Ellen Williams, Kerrville ISD's senior director of advanced academics. She says any district could benefit from having an AEC.

“We’re always saying, ‘What are our greatest needs? Let’s focus on that.’ There’s always room for growth,” Williams says.

Lord adds: “I look at it as a constant tweaking. We have a very well-oiled machine here, and we’re just fine-tuning it.”

Ironically, the tough economy has forced some districts to cut the very programs that the AEC members discovered and then implemented in Kerrville schools. Yet, those cuts haven’t happened in Kerrville ISD, which Troxell attributes to everyone’s high regard for the AEC.

“We put a system in place, and there are so many different innovations that this committee has brought to the district,” he says. “It has been a wonderful past seven years.”

RAVEN L. HILL is a former education reporter for the *Austin American-Statesman*.



Teacher Jennifer Lord reviews a science lesson with her third grade students at Daniels Elementary. Lord, who serves on Kerrville ISD's Academic Excellence Committee, says it's one of the most powerful tools the district has implemented.