



Local Evaluation of the Texas ACE Program at the La Joya Independent School District

Executive Summary July 2020

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

La Joya ISD ACE Program

The 2019-2020 academic school year is the second year La Joya Independent School District implemented the Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE) Program. The Texas Afterschool Centers on Education (ACE) is a grant program administered by the Texas Education Agency and is federally funded through the 21st Century Community Learning Centers initiative of the U.S. Department of Education. The Texas ACE Program supports the creation of community learning centers that provide at-risk students with enrichment activities that reinforce and complement the regular school day academic program.

At the end of each academic school year, each Texas ACE Program conducts a local evaluation to provide ACE Program centers with meaningful information to inform areas for program improvement and sustainability. Typically, the local evaluation adheres to guidelines provided by the Texas Education Agency. However, the COVID-19 pandemic interrupted the 2019-2020 school year by closing Texas schools, disrupting all educational programs including the ACE Program. From mid-March to the end of the school year, ACE Program activities were delivered through online platforms. The disruption in services delivery significantly impacted student attendance and engagement in ACE Program activities. Due to this disruption, it was concluded that following the evaluation guidelines for the 2019-2020 academic school year would not provide meaningful data that would truly inform the ACE Program. In addition, based on coronavirus spread in Texas, there is a high probability that some ACE Program activities might need to be delivered via online platforms during the 2020-2021 academic school year. To help collect meaningful information for program improvement and sustainability during the COVID era, parent and student surveys were designed and administered in the summer of 2020. In addition, a focus group discussion with site coordinators was conducted to collect information to help inform program delivery for the 2020-2021 academic school year.

Prior to school closures the La Joya ACE Program had made great strides in implementing the program. The team had implemented lessons learned from the 2018-2019 implementation year. Through marketing and recruitment efforts, the school communities that have ACE Program centers have gradually developed a better understanding and appreciation of the many benefits of the program. All of the 10 ACE Program centers at the La Joya ISD have met their recruitment, enrollment, and engagement numbers. ACE Program staff report that over the past two years, students, parents, school staff, and school building administrators have gradually embraced the program. The goal of the present local evaluation is to provide the La Joya ISD ACE Program centers with meaningful information to continue to improve the implementation of the ACE Program.

Survey Findings

The intent of the surveys was to gather perceptions from parents and students on a variety of topics related to the Texas ACE Program. In particular, the surveys were designed to collect information about parents' and students' perceptions regarding activities delivered through online platforms.

Parent Survey Findings

Parent surveys were developed in English and Spanish. A careful review of survey responses revealed that 564 parents provided sufficient information to be included in the survey

analyses. Of the 564 parent responses that were used in the survey analyses, 519 parents reported the grade level of their child during the 2019-2020 academic school year which allowed us to conduct disaggregated data analyses by three school levels: Elementary School, Middle School, and High School. The following sections provide a summary of the trends revealed through the analyses of the parent surveys.

The typical parent who completed the survey:

- Believes online Family Engagement activities provided during school closure were of the same quality as the ones provided face-to-face.
- Reports their child likes to participate with the online activities provided by the ACE Program during the school closure due to the COVID pandemic.
- Reports that the ACE Program has helped their child do better in school.
- Is satisfied with the Academic Support their child is receiving through the ACE Program.
- Is satisfied with the Enrichment activities their child is receiving through the ACE Program.
- Is satisfied with the College & Career Readiness activities their child is receiving through the ACE Program.
- Is satisfied with the Family Engagement activities their child is receiving through the ACE Program.
- Feels ACE Program staff members are easily available when they need to talk to them.
- Believes the ACE Program Coordinator and staff members communicated clearly about the program and services.
- Reports participation in the ACE Program has helped their child feel good about him/herself.
- Feels participation in the ACE Program has helped their child improve their school attendance.
- Believes participation in the ACE Program has helped their child improve their behavior.
- Rates the Academic component as the one component the ACE Program needs to improve.
- Rates the Academic component as the one component that provides the most value for their child.
- Reports that Spanish is the language most often spoken at home.

Areas for Improvement:

- Only about half of the parents indicated that they attended at least one parent engagement workshops/activities and less than 20% of parents reported they attended 3 or more parent engagement workshops/activities. Based on this information, the ACE Program teams should continue to work on increasing parent participation in parent engagement workshops/activities.

Observations:

- Disaggregated data analyses revealed that parents with a child in high school were more likely to report higher ratings on a variety of survey questions, suggesting an overall higher level of satisfaction with the ACE program than parents with a child in elementary school or middle school.

Student Survey Findings

Student surveys were developed in English. A careful review of survey responses revealed that 382 students provided sufficient information to be included in the survey analyses. Of the 382 student responses that were used in the survey analyses, 361 students reported the grade level they were in during the 2019-2020 academic school year which allowed us to conduct disaggregated data analyses by three school levels: Elementary School, Middle School, and High School. The following sections provide a summary of the trends revealed through the analyses of the student surveys.

The typical student who completed the survey:

- Believes the online Academic Support activities that were provided during the school closure due to the COVID pandemic were of the same quality as the ones provided face-to-face.
- Believes the online Enrichment activities that were provided during the school closure due to the COVID pandemic were of the same quality as the ones provided face-to-face.
- Believes the online College & Career Readiness activities that were provided during the school closure due to the COVID pandemic were of the same quality as the ones provided face-to-face.
- Likes to participate in online activities provided by the ACE Program.
- Reports their grades have improved since they started attending Academic Support activities in the ACE Program.
- Reports their attendance has improved since they started attending ACE Program activities.
- Reports their behavior has improved since they started attending ACE Program activities.
- Feels their interest in attending college and thinking about different careers has improved since they started attending the ACE Program.
- Rates teachers and staff from the ACE Program as attentive and caring.
- Believes the ACE Program Site Coordinator at their school knows who they are.
- Report that Spanish is the language most often spoken at home.

Areas for Improvement:

- Only six out of 10 students in middle school believe the online College & Career Readiness activities that were provided during the school closure due to the COVID pandemic were of the same quality as the ones provided face-to-face. The ACE Program could work on improving activities in this area or improve communication about the importance of this area.
- Only six out of 10 students in middle school and in high school report their attendance has improved since they started attending ACE Program activities. The ACE Program could examine regular school attendance records to determine if changes need to be made in middle school and high school programs.
- Only six out of 10 students in high school report their behavior has improved since they started attending ACE Program activities. The ACE Program could examine discipline referral records to see if changes need to be made in the high school program.

Observations:

- Disaggregated data analyses revealed that students in elementary school were more likely to report higher ratings on a variety of survey questions, suggesting an overall higher level of satisfaction with the ACE program than students in middle school or in high school.

Focus Group Discussion Findings

The focus group discussion was conducted to collect insights from the ACE Program team members (site coordinators and family engagement specialist) on how the delivery of content and implementation of the program could be improved during the COVID era. The following sections summarize some of the insights provided by ACE Program staff.

Support and Communication from the Director of the ACE Program. Focus group participants were asked to talk about strengths and areas for potential improvement on the support and the type of communication they received from the Director of the ACE Program.

All focus group participants reported they feel that Mrs. Leal, the Director of the ACE Program at La Joya ISD, provides excellent support and communicates effectively with staff members. Participants feel that Mrs. Leal has created an effective and efficient work environment and she provides the leadership necessary that allows team members to accomplish the required tasks to implement the grant. When staff members need guidance, Mrs. Leal has an open-door policy and she is easily accessible to team members. Mrs. Leal communicates effectively with ACE Program team members. When assignments are under her control, Mrs. Leal informs ACE Program staff about what needs to be accomplished in a timely manner so that staff has sufficient time to accomplish an assignment. Participants appreciate the manner Mrs. Leal communicates with them face-to-face, by telephone, by text, by e-mails, or through virtual platforms. A couple of participants indicated that they prefer to receive important communication by e-mails for documentation purposes.

No participants reported any concerns in the areas of support or communication from the ACE Program Director but provided a couple of suggestions for potential improvement. All participants stated that Mrs. Leal makes frequent visits to campuses during ACE Program activities. However, some of the participants from larger campuses suggested that they might benefit from having Mrs. Leal make more campus visits during regular school hours so that there could be more interactions between the ACE Program Director and some of the assistant principals. Participants were quick to note that this was not a concern but they felt that it could improve communication with the ACE Program because due to the scheduling rotation of assistant principals during afterschool hours, some assistant principals have had very limited interaction with ACE Program Administration. Visiting more frequently during regular school hours, would increase the probability of assistant principals interacting with ACE Program Administration.

Although focus group participants reported that Mrs. Leal provides them with information in a timely manner to accomplish assignments when it is under her control, participants reported that at times the ACE Program at the state level requests for information with a short turnaround time. Participants stated that when such requests are made, they feel pressured and anxious to complete the assignment on a timely manner. Participants feel they must stop everything they have planned for the program until the request is completed. Participants were unsure how to improve these situations because these quick turnaround requests are coming from outside the district.

Support and Communication from School Building Administration. Focus group participants were asked to talk about strengths and areas for potential improvement on the support and the communication they received from School Building Administration.

Participants provided mixed reviews regarding support and communication from school building administration. Some school building administrators are extremely supportive of the ACE Program and communicate effectively with ACE Program staff, while other school building administrators appear to simply view the ACE Program as just another responsibility on their agenda. Participants reported that they have attempted to explain the program on numerous occasions. Participants indicated that they walk a thin line between being viewed as someone who is advocating for the ACE Program and someone that may be viewed as bothering school administrators. Participants believe that some school building administrators simply do not see the potential of the ACE Program. Part of the challenge may be that in some campuses there are program and initiatives competing for similar resources. For example, participants stated that the district's tutoring program often recruits the same students as the ACE Program.

One potential solution to increase support from school building administration, is for ACE Program staff and administration to show up to a campus during regular school hours. This practice should increase visibility of the ACE Program staff to school building administrators which potentially increases the probability of interactions. Another possible solution is to request an invitation to campus building planning sessions which will provide an opportunity for ACE Program staff to highlight how the ACE Program can support the regular school day program. Attending campus building planning sessions will also afford an opportunity for the school day program administration team learn how they can support the ACE Program.

Access to Resources and Training. Focus group participants were asked to talk about their experience in acquiring resources for the ACE Program as well as their experience in obtaining professional development training opportunities to learn new skills that could help with implementing the ACE Program.

Participants stated that the ACE Program staff members are very self-directed and they are able to figure out how to obtain the necessary resources and training to effectively and efficiently implement the ACE Program. The ACE Program staff members stated that they help each other out by sharing resources and know-how-to-knowledge to acquire the necessary materials to implement the ACE Program successfully. The ACE Program staff views themselves as a very resourceful team that has been able to network with a variety of school district personnel to access what is needed in a timely manner. At this time, focus group participants indicated that they do not view any significant obstacles to obtain resources or training to implement the ACE Program. If there are any minor concerns, they feel that Mrs. Leal is supportive in helping the team acquire what is needed.

School Building Commitment Level for the ACE Program. Focus group participants were asked to talk about their perception of the commitment level individual campuses for the ACE Program.

Participants report that commitment at the campus level for the ACE Program largely depends on the school administration team. Some school administrators are extremely supportive and committed to the success of the ACE Program, while other campuses could improve their support and commitment level to the success of the program. School administrators that are committed to the success of the program encourage certified teachers to be tutors in the ACE

Program as well as carve out time in school building meetings for ACE Program site coordinators to talk about the ACE Program. Participants report that there has been improvement in staff buy-in into the program. Overall, school staff at individual campuses have gradually recognized the benefits of the ACE Program. Teachers and other school personnel are identifying and referring students that could benefit from ACE Program support. Participants note that there is much greater staff buy-in for the ACE Program in campuses where school administrators demonstrate greater commitment to the program.

Experience with Online Delivery of ACE Program Components. Focus group participants were asked to report on their experience of delivering ACE Program Components through online platforms.

All participants stated that delivering ACE Program components through online platforms was not equivalent to delivering components through in-person instruction. All participants stated that they experience significant drops in attendance. Online attendance for the 10 ACE Program sites ranged from 10% to 45% of what was typical of in-person attendance prior to the COVID pandemic. That is, ACE Program sites lost between 55% to 90% of their daily participation. Multiple hypotheses were listed as potential reason for lower attendance rates that included: lack of access to computers, lack of access to internet connection, students getting bored with online material and losing interest, etc. Participants also listed numerous strategies they attempted to increase online student attendance and engagement such as contacting students and parents through telephone, texting, e-mail, and home visits. Engagement strategies included recruiting enthusiastic teachers that used virtual engagement techniques. Providing incentives and rewards for student attendance and participation. However, even with multiple strategies student attendance and engagement with online instruction is considered a significant challenge. In addition, the regular school day program and other educational programs were competing with recruiting students into online instruction that might have been overwhelming for students. Focus group participants stated that they recognize that student attendance and engagement will be one of their primary challenges if and when the ACE Program has to deliver services through online platforms in the future. Participants expressed significant concerns about the number of students they will be expected to recruit, enroll, and engage in the ACE Program for 45 days if ACE Program activities will be delivered through online platforms or if a significant number of students/parents elect a remote learning option for the 2020-2021 academic school year.

Reopening of Schools. The final topics focus group participants were asked about were related to concerns about reopening of schools and requests for professional development they feel would better prepare them to work with students for the 2020-2021 academic school year.

Regarding reopening of schools, participants expressed concerns about the health of students and their personal health. Participants also expressed concerns if they would be able to recruit and hire enough staff to run the ACE Program. Participants also restated that they are concerned about the number of students they will be expected to recruit, enroll, and engage in the ACE Program for at least 45 days if ACE Program activities must be delivered through online platforms. Participants also are concerned that there seems to be a competition to recruit the same students for multiple educational programs which limits the availability of students from which ACE Program Site Coordinators can recruit.

There were two primary professional development topics participants expressed interest on. One was learning about how to recruit students to increase attendance when the ACE Program

activities must be delivered through an online platform. The other topic was learning how to increase student engagement when activities must be delivered online.

Recommendations for the 2019-2020 Academic School Year

Based on the information obtained during the program evaluation process, the following next steps were identified to: (1) continue with the current successes of the program and (2) to improve certain areas of the program. More specifically, these recommendations are provided to be used during the COVID era.

- Conducting a needs assessment in collaboration with regular school day program leadership will be important to identify the type of support schools will need during the COVID era.
- During the COVID era, it is going to be critically important for ACE Program sites to develop a formal written plan (e.g., Memorandum of Agreement or Memorandum of Understanding) between the regular school day leadership and the ACE Program leadership to increase shared understanding of how the relationship between the regular school day program and the ACE Program will function during this time. The written plan should include clarification of roles, responsibilities, and goals during the COVID era. In particular, sites must understand how things might change if instructions go from remote learning to in-person learning and vice versa.
- Continue establishing and strengthening relationships with students, parents, and staff to help with the identification and recruitment of students into the ACE Program when activities must be delivered through online platforms.
- Continuing to work in establishing and/or strengthening relationships with any new regular school day program leadership will be critical for the continued success of the implementation effort.
- Continue to collect and use data more effectively to help guide as well as prioritize student recruitment and retention practices. This will be more important because data indicates that it is more difficult to recruit, enroll, and retain students when services are provided through online platforms.
- Continue to work closely with regular school day staff administration to increase buy-in of the ACE Program as an essential component of student success.
- Continue working closely with administrators, school personnel, and community members to integrate the ACE Program into the school community so that it can be perceived as an important component in student success that can have sustainability and not just be perceived as an additional program that provides some activities.
- Continue to work to increase participation in parent workshops/activities.
- Communicate and work closely with ACE Program personnel at the state level so that they can have a realistic expectations of the number of students that can be recruited, enrolled, and engaged in the ACE Program when services must be delivered through online platforms.
- Provide professional development training opportunities to ACE Program team members on topics related to student recruitment and engagement when content is delivered through online platforms.