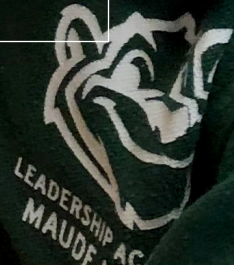


# Putting Students First: Texas' 1882 Statute Sustains Partnership Schools in Fort Worth

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MARCH 2022

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## PREFACE

The pandemic put both a microscope and a wide-angle lens on America's education systems. Under the microscope, parents had a window into individual classrooms as never before, as their children struggled to learn through laptops. Many didn't like what they observed. Through the wide angled lens, the country was jolted by evidence that school districts everywhere were failing to adapt. Failing to meet the moment. Failing to stem learning loss.

Many recognized that perhaps 150 years were more than enough of centralized, bureaucratic school systems. What we at Progressive Policy Institute have been saying for many years — that it is time for something different — began resonating with parents across the country.

What that "something" is will likely be different in different places to meet differing needs. But for large school districts, it is painfully obvious that top-heavy central administrations that push a standardized, one-size fits all school experience are as antiquated as paper road maps. We believe that everyone — except perhaps overstaffed central bureaucracies and the teachers unions — would benefit from more decentralized and more accountable school systems.

One auspicious approach is the partnership model. The model in a nutshell: a school district partners with a qualified nonprofit to operate a school or a subset of its schools, usually using a performance contract to define the terms of the relationship.

Even before the pandemic disrupted the education of a generation of students, an increasing number of urban districts around the country were experimenting with the partnership model. As with anything new, some early adopters are doing better at it than others. This report tells the story of one promising effort: the Leadership Academy Network (LAN) in Fort Worth, Texas. LAN is a partnership between the Fort Worth Independent School District (FWISD) and Texas Wesleyan University (TXWES).

LAN is unique because it is effectively a "homegrown" initiative, meaning the district did not simply bring in a proven charter school operator to manage its failing schools; it launched the turnaround on its own prior to its partnership with Texas Wesleyan University.

It is a modern partnership adopted by a district willing to venture out of its bureaucratic comfort zone in order to sustain improvements in what had been some of its lowest performing elementary and middle schools.

This report will cover how and why the FWISD went the partnership route, how the LAN got up and running, how it works, and how it is working. It will also take the reader inside LAN's schools, which will hopefully inspire pragmatic thinkers to encourage more places to consider its data-driven instructional model. At the center of LAN's model is the practice of providing students support to master the skill or topic being taught before they move on to the next lesson.

Now is the moment to embrace innovation in America's public K-12 school systems. Millions of students who were already academically behind prior to the pandemic are suffering from significant learning loss. Therefore, it is imperative that we accelerate and scale efforts like Fort Worth's LAN partnership to improve and modernize our education systems.

## INTRODUCTION

In 2017, bitter and protracted fights<sup>1</sup> over sanctuary cities and transgender bathrooms dominated both the Texas legislative session and media headlines. There was at least one shoving match on the House floor and, after a particularly contentious debate, a couple of legislators threatened to shoot each other dead in the Capitol's parking lot.

Amidst that chaos, Texas' lawmakers did manage to pass Senate Bill 1882,<sup>2</sup> which provides financial incentives<sup>3</sup> for school districts to partner with carefully vetted nonprofits to operate district schools. SB 1882 is similar — but not identical — to partnership statutes in a growing number of other states, including Colorado,<sup>4</sup> Indiana,<sup>5</sup> New Jersey,<sup>6</sup> Tennessee,<sup>7</sup> and others. Los Angeles, Memphis, Indianapolis, Charleston, S.C., Springfield, Mass., Chicago, and several other cities are also trying partnership schools. Partnering has become a new model

of how large urban districts can reinvent themselves, shifting from centralized, rule-driven, and bureaucratic to decentralized, mission-driven, and innovative.

In each state, the bills' architects wanted to prompt traditional districts to proactively improve the delivery of education services. In the case of perennially failing schools, the goal is for the district to bring in a qualified organizations to improve schools the district itself had been unable to turnaround. In cases where a school was limping along but not necessarily failing, the bills' sponsors hoped offering the partnership model would inspire district leaders to give a partner the autonomy to turn mediocre schools into great schools. In some places — Indianapolis and Denver, for example — if a school's leader and enough teachers want to, they can vote to become an autonomous school.

While some districts grant more autonomy than others, in almost all cases, the nonprofit's contract with the district is a performance contract that articulates specific success metrics for improved student outcomes. If the school meets the deliverable, the contract is renewed. Sometimes, the successful school is allowed to expand or replicate on another campus. If the school fails to meet its performance goals,<sup>8</sup> the district replaces the operator or returns the school to district governance.

By replacing the low performers, replicating the best, and developing new models to meet new needs, the district almost guarantees continuous improvement. This new formula — autonomy, accountability, diversity of school designs, and parental choice<sup>9</sup> — is simply more effective than the centralized, bureaucratic approach we inherited from the 20th century.

Because governance is decentralized to the local school level, these schools are also nimbler<sup>10</sup> when challenges like those wrought by the pandemic arise. Decisions can be made with increased parental input and without central office bureaucratic red tape.

In some places, the partner-operated school remains in the same school building, with the same neighborhood students. If there are empty seats after all zoned students enroll, the schools may enroll students from outside the zone using random lotteries. In other places, they are purely schools of choice. For example, three rural Texas counties have banded together to create a regional Rural Schools Innovation Zone<sup>11</sup> of specialized high school academies. Students from all three counties can choose to attend any academy in the zone.

No matter how they enroll their student body, all nonprofit school partners must follow all state and federal laws while operating the school — anti-discrimination protections, the Americans with Disabilities Act, procurement procedures, workplace safety regulations, and so on — but they are exempted from most school district policies and in some places, collective bargaining agreements. Each partner has its own board of directors or trustees that oversees the school or schools, with various degrees of independence from the school district board. Our research finds that the more independence the partner's board has, the better the model works.<sup>12</sup>

In Texas, the 1882 statute<sup>13</sup> spells out certain autonomies districts are required to give their partner-operator in order for the state's department of education, the Texas Education Agency (TEA), to grant the extra funding. The required autonomies include freedom to make

staffing, budget, and curriculum decisions. As Fort Worth Independent School District's Chief Officer of Innovation David Saenz put it, "The state must be able to see (in the proposed partnership contract) that there has been no negotiation of terms on those issues between the district and the partner." Other autonomies can be — and should be — negotiated before the performance contract is signed.

Texas' exchange of extra funding for the mandatory autonomies is a pragmatic bargain for several reasons. School turnaround is difficult<sup>14</sup> and sustaining improved outcomes is expensive. Providing an incentive for high quality school operators to take on a floundering school while giving districts an incentive to relinquish a low-performing school is a win for the students in that school building.

It also increases transparency and accountability. Because the district and partner sign a performance contract, all parties understand the metrics for success or failure from the outset of the partnership. If the partner doesn't meet the terms of the agreement, at the end of the contract, it loses the right to continue operating the school.

Finally, when a school improves, the district gets to include its higher test scores in its submission to the TEA, thereby raising the entire district's rating. And, the district is freed from managing a challenged campus, allowing it to redirect its resources to other campuses.

The district-nonprofit partnership model is one that large urban districts everywhere can employ to reinvent themselves. We have seen for ourselves that it can transform schools<sup>15</sup> hamstrung by central-administration bureaucratic whim into mission-driven organizations liberated to innovate.

Progressive Policy Institute's Reinventing America's Schools project in 2020 published a comprehensive guide<sup>16</sup> to this school model, complete with model legislation that incorporates the strongest elements of the various state statutes mentioned above. The schools we wrote about are known by different names in different places. In Camden, N.J., they are "renaissance schools."<sup>17</sup> In Indianapolis they are "innovation network schools,"<sup>18</sup> while in Denver, innovations schools can organize themselves into "zones," which are then commonly called "iZone schools."<sup>19</sup> Across Texas, they are nicknamed after the law that created them: "1882 schools."

In Fort Worth, the nickname is especially appropriate, as the legislature passed SB 1882 in the nick of time for the district. FWISD had started a turnaround initiative in some of its low-performing schools that was making rapid progress, but it was running out of resources to sustain the momentum. SB 1882 created the mechanism that allowed LAN to continue what FWISD started.

### **FWISD Initiates a Pilot**

In the winter of 2017, FWISD announced it would seek to transform five low-performing schools into "Leadership Academies,"<sup>20</sup> in an effort to improve student outcomes. The TEA had rated one of the schools, John T. White Elementary, as "improvement required" (IR) for six straight years. Another, Logan Elementary, had been rated IR for five years. At White, third grade reading proficiency was 21%, while at Logan, it was just 7%. The other two elementary schools, Como and Mitchell Boulevard had, been rated IR for three, each with third grade reading proficiency below 20%. The lone middle school in the group had been rated IR for seven of the

previous eight years.

Recognizing that highly effective teachers are critical to student success, especially on such challenged campuses, the district proposed a "strategic teacher compensation strategy" as part of its turnaround effort. The teachers would be hand selected for their effectiveness and drive. They would be paid more but they had to commit to both teaching an additional hour every day and putting in significant extra professional development time. The campuses also adopted an extended day, with campuses open to students from 7:30 a.m. until 6:00 p.m., with wrap around services offered before and after school hours.

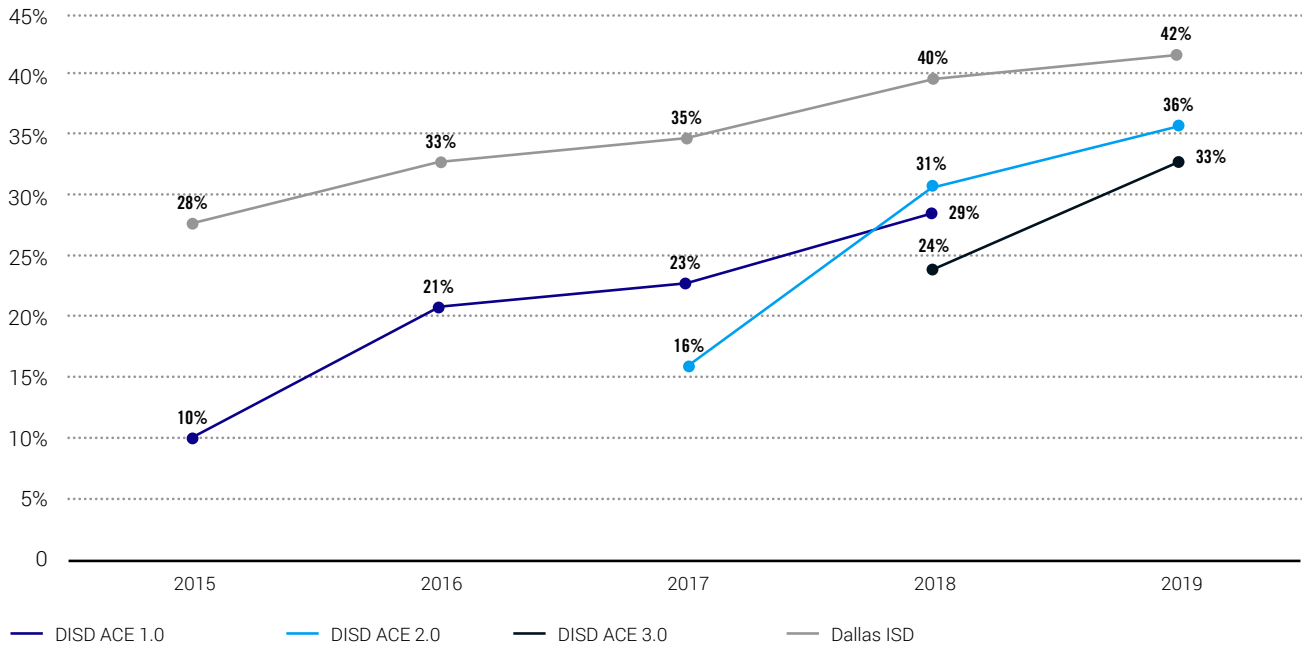
All of this, of course, cost quite a bit of extra money. While the district found the initial funds to pay teachers for the extra time and professional development, it wasn't enough. Fortunately, a local nonprofit with a long tradition of supporting local education initiatives, The Richard Rainwater Foundation, has donated \$1 million<sup>21</sup> each year to support after-school enrichment programs and teaching assistants, along with subsidies for student uniforms and supports for school culture and morale.

### **School Model**

The district also realized, like the quality of the teaching, the quality of a school's design can make or break a reform initiative. FWISD adopted the Accelerating Campus Excellence (ACE) model because it was rapidly improving performance in the neighboring Dallas Independent School District (DISD).

### DALLAS ACE RESULTS 2015-2019 STAAR DATA

Staar All Grades/All Subjects at "MEETS" Standard for Dallas ISD ACE Cohorts vs Dallas ISD Average



Source: All data based on TEA STAAR aggregate performance at "Meets" standard 2015-2019 reports

#### Accelerating Campus Excellence Model (ACE Model)

- Strategic Staffing
- Instructional Excellence
- Extended School Day
- Social and Emotional Learning
- Parent and Community Organizations

Organized around five core principles, ACE organizes teachers into groups called "professional learning communities" (PLC). In their PLCs, teachers collaborate to facilitate lesson planning that is aligned to students' progress or, alternatively, lack of progress. Called "mastery teaching," it means teachers don't move students on to a new lesson until they have first mastered the content in front of them. This makes sense because any student would be challenged to grasp algebra, for example, if he or she had never mastered multiplication and division.

ACE also includes behavior intervention to support children's social emotional needs, with a focus on restorative discipline when needed. Additionally, ACE pays particular attention to parent and community communication and relationships.

FWISD put one of its veteran administrators, Priscila Dilley, in charge of the turnaround initiative. Dilley had spent eight years as a district administrator working in struggling schools, tasked with turning them around before the TEA could officially designate them as “improvement required.”

Priscila Dilley, Senior Officer, Leadership Academy Network



Because of her success administering her own schools, district leaders plucked Dilley to work out of the central office to help turn around other troubled campuses as well. When she took the helm of the ACE/Leadership Academy Network implementation project, the district was in full turnaround mode in the five schools in the portfolio.

“We were able to hire veteran principals and entire new teaching staffs, because we were able to offer that incentive pay,” Dilley said. “Our strategy was to hire great principals; they were able to bring good teachers along, because people really wanted to work for these great leaders.”

Dilley says the effort cost about \$1 million for each campus, but it worked. In the program’s first year as a district initiative, the schools

went from “F” in student growth to a “B” in student growth on the TEA’s rating scale — a tremendous leap by any standard.

But Dilley worried. In fact, everyone worried. Those five schools certainly weren’t the only FWISD schools in need in of help. At \$1 million per school, it was simply impossible for FWISD — even with help from private foundations like Rainwater — to sustain the funding, let alone scale it to a substantial number of the district’s more than 143 campuses.

Then SB 1882 was signed into law. The program officers at Rainwater who were tasked with managing the foundation’s grants to FWISD recognized that the new funding stream SB 1882 created might be just the ticket to sustaining the district’s ACE turnaround initiative. Rainwater suggested the district pursue it, and even better,

### Measuring Student Growth

Student growth measures students’ year-over-year improvement. For example, if a fifth grader started the year reading at a first grade level, but at the end of the school year was reading at a fourth grade level, that student would exceed growth expectations by growing three grades in one school year. Proficiency, on the other hand, means that in core subjects a student can perform at grade level on the TEA’s rating scale. In this scenario, the student would not be considered “proficient” because he or she would still be a grade level behind the standard for fifth grade reading. This student would likely score “approaching proficiency.”

Rainwater helped FWISD identify the perfect partner. The foundation knew it would have to be a highly trustworthy partner for the district to take the unprecedented step of handing over control of the five struggling schools.

### **Incubating the Model: Texas Wesleyan University Comes to the Table**

Nearly 125 years ago, Texas Wesleyan University (TXWES) opened its doors on the far outskirts of Fort Worth. Founded as the city's first teachers college, its choice of location was deliberate. The founders wanted to keep its young female students out of easy reach of the cowboys who frequented the saloons around the city's famed stockyards. Today, Texas Wesleyan is in the city's urban center, just minutes from the schools FWISD was reforming under the watchful eye of Dilley and her team.

When Rainwater approached Carlos Martinez, Dean of Education and Professor of Bilingual Education, Dr. Martinez knew that if the university decided to partner with FWISD, "It would be by far the most complex project I had done in my 35 years in education, and my 30 years at Texas Wesleyan."

But he didn't say no. He wanted to hear more. "The university has had a long relationship with FWISD. In a city this size, it is important to be a good steward and build collaborative relationships — assuming it's also a good deal for the university, of course," he explained.

On the district side, officials were excited by the idea of a partnership with Texas Wesleyan — and the 1882 money it could bring. First, however, the district would have to come to terms with the university on a performance contract. According to Dr. Martinez, executing such a deal would not only be a first for the district, it would also make his university the first nonprofit

college in the country to contract with a district to operate select schools through an in-district charter school relationship.

Everyone involved quickly realized the partnership could be a win-win, but there were many details to hammer out. Almost every department at both TXWES and FWISD was involved in the discussions at one time or another. In the end, the parties agreed that in addition to assuming responsibility for LAN's governance, the university's School of Education would draw on its faculty's expertise to provide data-driven academic oversight and intensive professional development for LAN's teachers.

After reviewing the new partnership's application for 1882 status, the TEA agreed that the partnership contract granted the LAN schools sufficient autonomy. In the fall of 2019, LAN was officially an 1882 school network, and it was off to a strong start.



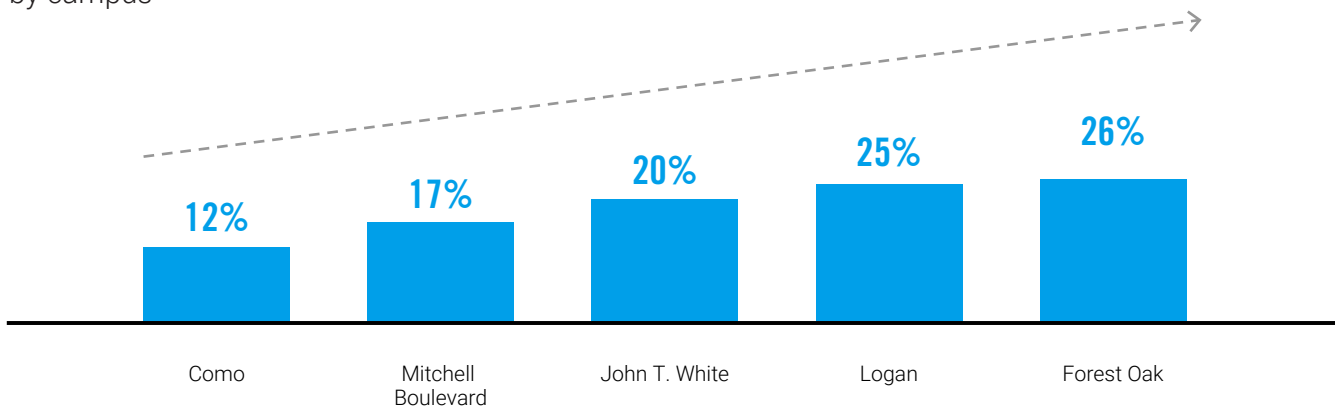
**LAN Hits the Ground Running**

At the end of the first year of the FWISD turnaround initiative, all five of Dilley's schools' TEA growth scores had risen from an "F" to "B" rating. When the LAN partnership took over the schools in fall of 2019, it arrived armed with targeted strategies and ambitious campus-specific performance goals. Its mission was to sustain and build on the district's momentum.

By the end of the 2019 fall semester, it was clear things were moving in the right direction. Periodic benchmark testing – administered every six weeks – showed every LAN school achieving explosive student growth from the first six week benchmark to the semester's final six week benchmark test. Dilley credits her principals' and teachers' rigorous implementation of best practices in every classroom for the dramatic results.

**LAN 2020 FALL SEMESTER**

Percentage of growth demonstrated by benchmark testing from the first six weeks to third six weeks by campus



Source: Leadership Academy Network Annual Report 2019-2020

In the spring of 2020, the pandemic interrupted LAN's momentum as demonstrated by the benchmark testing. It also wrecked LAN's ability to "officially" record student growth on state tests at the end of the end of the partnership's first year. With schools shuttered, Texas, like other states, canceled state testing. LAN pivoted quickly to remote learning and pulled out the stops to get its 3,000 students online and into virtual classrooms. Dr. Martinez said, "Parents are still satisfied relative to the pandemic, but things are nowhere where they would have been if it hadn't happened."

**Pivoting in the Pandemic: School Improvement During Lockdown**

When FWISD closed its buildings, LAN had no choice but to close its schools as well – and most parents would've likely declined to send their children into those buildings anyway.

This put intense pressure on LAN's staff. Before the coronavirus forced much of the world into isolation, most of LAN's students were far behind the academic standard for their grade level. While the district launched learning loss remediation programs<sup>22</sup> to help its traditional

school students catch up, LAN has a heavier lift. In addition to catching students up, it is contractually obligated to meet steep growth metrics on state tests.<sup>23</sup> In addition to student growth metrics, the network must also earn a TEA accountability rating of “A” overall by the end of the 2024-2025 school year for all of its campuses, according to its contract with the

district. If it doesn’t, the district can decline to renew its contract to operate the schools or the district could lose its TEA 1882 funding. Either would have serious repercussions for LAN. Priscila Dilley and her staff are determined not to let that happen.

### LAN’S CONTRACTUAL SCHOOL PERFORMANCE OBLIGATIONS

Rating by TEA that measures student achievement and growth

	2020	2021	2022	2023	2024
<b>Como Elementary</b>	B	B	B	B	A
<b>John T. White Middle School</b>	B	B	B	B	A
<b>Mitchell Boulevard Middle School</b>	B	B	B	B	A
<b>Forest Oak Middle School</b>	B	B	B	B	A

Source: Leadership Academy Network Annual Report 2019-2020

With the clock ticking on its deadline to improve, the value of LAN’s autonomy from central district bureaucracy became even more apparent. Unencumbered by red tape and in closer contact with students than a remote central office ever could be, the high-poverty school network nimbly pivoted to minimize the shutdown’s harm.

“If multiple kids living together in one apartment were all trying to log on (to the internet) at the same time, without sufficient connectivity, my principals could just change the times for everything to spread the lessons out,” Dilley said. “They found very specific ways to meet unusual needs.”

As one of Rainwater’s program officers, Sarah Geer, puts it, “The shortness of the decision-making tree allows Dilley to make adjustments. It’s not like a district where 20 different departments need to weigh in. That’s when you really see the value of autonomy. It’s responding in real time.”

Dilley’s team was also aware that many of her students’ parents couldn’t work from home. “We set up Google classrooms, but we cautioned teachers to distribute lessons that didn’t require adult supervision. It had to be easy – things that kids could do, like maybe 20 simple slides where all they had to do was click through. In some

cases, we had elderly grandparents watching over multiple kids. They said, 'Don't even think about the computer for us, we need packets.' So, we distributed paper packets to those households instead."

Regardless of the method by which LAN delivered instruction, one thing never changed: real time interventions based on data-driven analysis of student performance.

### **School Visits: Examining a Model Grounded in Data and Mastery**

Behind the wheel of her Texas-sized SUV, looking even tinier than she actually is, Dilley pulls up to Leadership Academy at Forest Oak's middle school campus.

"One morning, we had to do an emergency phone tree to delay opening, because we found a dead body right there," she says, pointing at the school's main entrance. "We weren't sure we would be able to get it taken away in time. That's the neighborhood these schools are in, that my kids live in."

Slamming the SUV's door and throwing an equally Texas-sized bag over her shoulder, she added, "And, it did come down to the wire. I was so worried the kids would arrive at their school and see that."

Inside, it's lunchtime mayhem in Renee Williams sixth-grade math classroom. Williams teaches five periods and a homeroom. The noon hour finds her not eating in the faculty lounge, as one might reasonably expect, but rather, hosting a karaoke jam for 13 students who have nowhere else to be.



*Renee Williams hosts a karaoke jam with students in her classroom.*

They become shy when visitors enter, immediately insisting "Ms. Williams" take back the mic. She does it without a shred of self-consciousness, belting out Matthew Wilder's 1984 hit "Ain't Nothing Gonna Break My Stride," with such enthusiasm that most of the students are soon dancing along. While the almost-40-year-old tune is apropos to LAN's mission, Ms. Williams is also hip to her middle school students' modern tastes. Images of the wildly popular Korean boy band BTS line her classroom walls, along with colorful hand-drawn charts. Lots of charts — including multiple data charts and "anchor charts" (teacher jargon for visual reminders of previous lessons, as new lessons build on the same topic).

When questioned about the anchor charts — a tool most commonly seen in elementary schools — Dilley explained that she made a conscious choice to hire a former elementary school principal to oversee LAN's middle school.

"I said, why do we stop doing elementary school best practices like small groups and anchor charts on the wall in middle schools? Maybe people think it's too cutesy or babyish, but that's not the case. These kids are still young kids. Everybody needs those best practices — especially our kids."



Priscila Dilley greets a LAN student.

Ms. Williams agrees with the boss about their students' challenges. "I had one student who witnessed a shooting in the home. I must meet that need before I'm like, 'Do your math homework!' You have to have a relationship with every student, because if you don't, you won't know what is going on with them."

Teachers knowing "what is going on" personally with LAN's students is an obvious network-wide ethos, as are the ubiquitous student performance data charts that meticulously record and constantly update "what's going on" with students academically.

They are in every classroom and are the heart of LAN's data-driven mastery of learning model. Called "Demonstration of Learning" charts, they inform almost everything LAN teachers and principals do, from determining appropriate student academic interventions to assigning teachers' professional development. After each lesson, teachers briefly quiz students to learn in real time how well they grasped the material they were just taught.

FEEDBACK LEGEND		
Symbol	Grade	How to Respond
☆	100	Keep it Up!
✓	85	Tweak It
?	75	Fix It
X	50	REDO IT
⊘	0	START IT

Demonstration of learning.

A star means a student scored 100% and the response is "Keep it up!" A check mark corresponds to a score of 85% to 99% and the response is "Tweak it!" A question mark indicates a score of 75% to 84% and the response is "Fix it!" An "X" corresponds to a score of 50% to 74% and the response is "Re-do it!" Finally, a zero with a slash means the student did not turn in any work or participate in the lesson and quiz. In this case, the response is "Start it!"

Depending on how students score, they are organized for an intervention, like individual tutoring or small group relearning, until they master the concept or skill being taught. The Demonstration of Learning charts also provide a real-time window into the classroom for Dilley's principals, who spend very little time sitting behind their office desks.

About Forest Oak's principal, Dilley explains, "She loves hard, but she is tough on staff and students. Sometimes they say, 'Why is she always in our classrooms?' Well, I tell them, 'Gone are the days when the principal stays

in their office. You cannot make change from behind a desk.”

As Dilley’s principals prowl the halls, they review Demonstration of Learning charts in real time to see how successful teachers are at conveying lessons to students, offering coaching and other supports as needed. Frequently, if a principal has a teacher who has, for example, 90% of a class at mastery, while another principal has a teacher with 30% of students at mastery of the same lesson, the struggling teacher might be asked to observe his or her higher scoring colleague to learn what that teacher is doing.

The point is not to punish or to embarrass, but to coax the very best out of LAN’s teachers for the students’ benefit. Fourth grade math teacher Matthew Ellison confirms this. “I love the atmosphere, the positivity here,” he said. “Teachers are extended greater trust here than in the district. For example, we can design our own lesson plans, with support and guidance.”



*Forest Oak Middle School.*

Dilley’s uses a similar “trust with guidance” approach with the network’s school principals. She meets with them several times a week, to go over their schools’ Demonstration of Learning charts. This means, at the very highest level of the organization, every student and every teacher are

being tracked and provided exactly the supports they need to improve both teaching and learning.

“We are very methodical,” she explained. “My team organizes the schools into three tiers and we schedule site-visit frequency accordingly to give job coaching and feedback. We rally around our newest principals, and we make it a point to keep out of the others’ way.”

As we head down the hall to the principal’s office — which she is in only because we have an appointment — Dilley prepares me. “Seretha Lofton is a top-notch principal who has been an educator for 30 years. We hired her out of the district, at the beginning, when this was still a district pilot.” As we round the corner she adds, “I keep out of her way.”

### **Staffing the Instructional Model**

As I greet Lofton, she volunteers, in a syrupy Texas drawl, that her boss is “1,000 levels of precious.” I ask her how things have changed since the district put Dilley in charge.

Lofton rolls her eyes, “When I got here, it was a complete mess. They didn’t have the right people on the bus or any of the right people in the right seats.” She continued, “It takes ‘will and skill.’ I can fix your skill but I cannot tamper with your will. I said, if we’re shooting for an “A” rating, I need strategic staffing with the right people together with the right skills.”

With Dilley’s guidance Lofton overhauled her staff. “I hire people for my administrative team who share and adopt my vision,” she explained. “I also have an administrator over every (academic) subject.”

Beyond hiring, she is intensely involved with the employees who staff the model she designed. “On Friday I have a meeting just with my nine

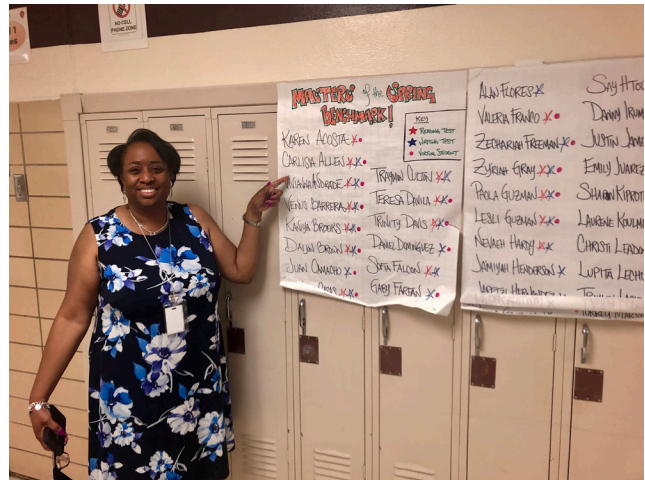
or 10 administrators and student support team: counselors, intervention specialists and social workers.” Lofton also followed the ACE model and organized her teachers and administrators into smaller teams LAN calls professional learning communities. Lofton claims the PLCs foster teamwork and support among administrators and teachers that spreads across the wider faculty.

Another autonomy she extols is the flexibility she’s been given over her school’s bell schedule. The veteran educator explained, “In the district schools, I was raised on 45-minute classroom periods. That is not enough when you are teaching seventh graders who are reading at a third grade level. Come on, even the best teacher can’t do that in just 45 minutes!”

Forest Oak’s periods are instead 65 minutes. The extra time built into each period allows teachers to re-teach, to administer Demonstration of Learning assessments and to work with students in small groups — all which Lofton says that her students really need.

Despite the extra time on task, when teachers realized that the math curriculum wasn’t working well for LAN’s challenged students, Lofton and other principals asked Dilley’s team to change it. A major curriculum change like that would have been difficult and time consuming in an organization the size of FWISD. But LAN’s Executive Director of Academics, Whitney Clark, quickly researched other options, then asked the teachers to “test drive” alternatives. Clark and Dilley carefully considered their feedback, then pivoted to the curriculum the teachers and administrators believed would most effectively help students learn.

As we leave Lofton’s office, she calls me back for one final comment.



*Principal Seretha Lofton celebrates students' success.*

“Honey, in a nutshell, the support here is what is making this work. Dilley knows if I am calling her up, I have already tried to fix the problem on my own in any number of ways,” Lofton said. “This is the first time in 30 years I never feel like I am being judged. I can be totally transparent without feeling stupid,” she concluded, smacking her hand sharply on her underused desk for emphasis.

I promise her I will include her commentary, then I hurry after Dilley who is focused on our next stop.

As we plow through Fort Worth traffic, I ask Dilley more about LAN’s culture of aggressively monitoring both students and teachers as part of her core instructional model.

“Before the LAN partnership commenced, when this was a still a district pilot, I was kind of dating the method, but when I became LAN’s Senior Officer, I married the mission,” she said. “I knew that if I wanted the district to trust my decisions, I had to absolutely commit to bringing the district what it needed at the finish line.”

With those words, what Rainwater’s program officers, Sarah Geer and Chris Shropshire, had told me about Dilley’s relentless pursuit of her mission came into sharper focus.

Shropshire's philosophy is that when traditional education systems struggle it's because they lack a clearly defined education model. This results in school or district leaders investing in programs where impact and stability are constantly shifting to trends that are "hot" at the moment.

Geer agrees. "That is spot on," she cried. "When you visit a good school, no matter the type, you will find a defined school model and systems that are built consistent with that model, people hired consistent with the model, data used to serve the model, you can cost out the model; everything that happens in that school is built around implementing the school model."

She finished with an analogy, "You might change your shoes once in a while, but you're not changing how you walk."

The second LAN school on my tour was in its third straight year of a TEA "F" rating when the pilot that led to the LAN partnership began. As we park nearby, Dilley admits that the campus caused some of the team's biggest headaches when it came to implementing LAN's model. She explained that while the school is high-poverty, if you walk a mile in any direction, you'll run into multi-million dollar homes. "As a result," she said, "the community immediately around the school is very tight and very protective." It was also very suspicious of the party line when the reform initiative was announced.

"We held town hall after town hall with parents," Dilley sighed. "Early on, the parents were just convinced we were doing them wrong. To try to change hearts and minds, we just kept pointing out the terrible student performance data."

Dilley's team used the staffing autonomy the district granted to require any teacher who wanted to stay under the new governance



*LAN students enjoy the sunshine during a fire drill.*

structure to re-apply for his or her job. That resulted in major staffing changes, which Rainwater's program officers call "the most important and the most fundamental to any turnaround effort."

Once Dilley and her principal had their faculty in place, they used the improved student data that quickly followed to try to build relationships with the school's stakeholders. After the first year, when the school went from an "F" rated school to a "B" rated school, the parents were all in.

"Having observed what all of these new teachers were willing to do for their babies didn't hurt either," Dilley said.

### **Outcomes**

As previously noted, on the TEA's rating scale, during the district's pilot program that was the precursor to the LAN, in the first year of the program (2018-2019), the schools in the portfolios went from "F" in student growth to a "B" in student growth.

If the pandemic had not struck and LAN had been able to complete the 2019-2020 school year doing business as usual, it is likely that Dilley and her leadership team would have beat their deadline to earn a TEA "A" rating by several years on at least some of LAN's campuses.

Of course, COVID-19 showed no mercy. On March 16, 2020, the pandemic forced all campuses to close for the remainder of the school year. State testing was canceled and there is no 2019-2020 end-of-year data to evaluate. However, while districts across the country were “losing” tens of thousands of students,<sup>24</sup> the LAN’s campuses maintained a 91.6% (remote) average daily attendance, which demonstrates the schools’ concerted effort to keep families and students engaged in learning.

In 2020-2021, the state resumed the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness<sup>25</sup> (STAAR) testing, but recognizing the ongoing disruption schools experienced, it did not use the scores to assign campus letter grades.

LAN joined most other Texas schools in seeing learning loss as reflected by 2021’s STAAR proficiency scores. For example, the number of third graders not meeting state standards in reading across the network’s elementary schools increased about 10% from the last state tests two years’ earlier.

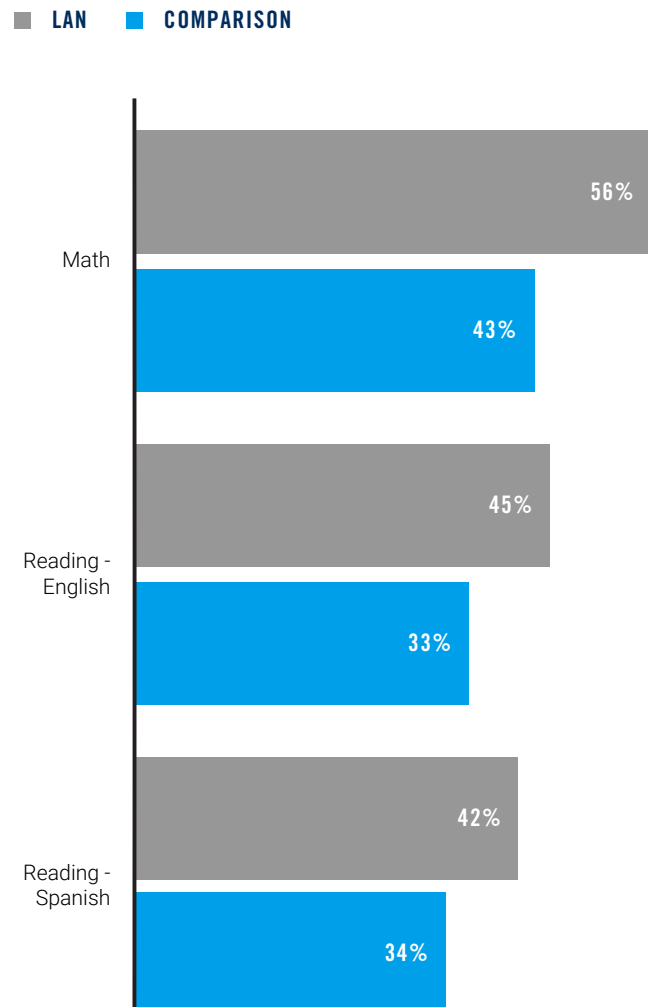
However, during the 2020-2021 school year, LAN’s student growth remained strong. Both the district and the LAN used the nationally normed NWEA MAP (measures of academic progress) Growth<sup>26</sup> tests to measure student progress in both reading and math. Thus, there is a basis for comparison.

To avoid “comparing apples to oranges,” the state department of education officially designates which FWISD schools’ scores can accurately be compared to LAN. (This avoids comparing LAN’s high-poverty students with traditional school students clustered in wealthy neighborhoods.) The “comparison schools” match LAN’s economic and racial demographics. When measured against district comparison schools, a higher percentage of LAN

students met their growth goals for the year in both subjects. On the MAP:

- LAN students scored +13% points higher in Math
- LAN students scored +9% points higher in Reading-English
- LAN students scored +8% points higher in Reading-Spanish

**ALL LAN STUDENTS VS. ALL DISTRICT COMPARISON SCHOOL STUDENTS 2020-2021**

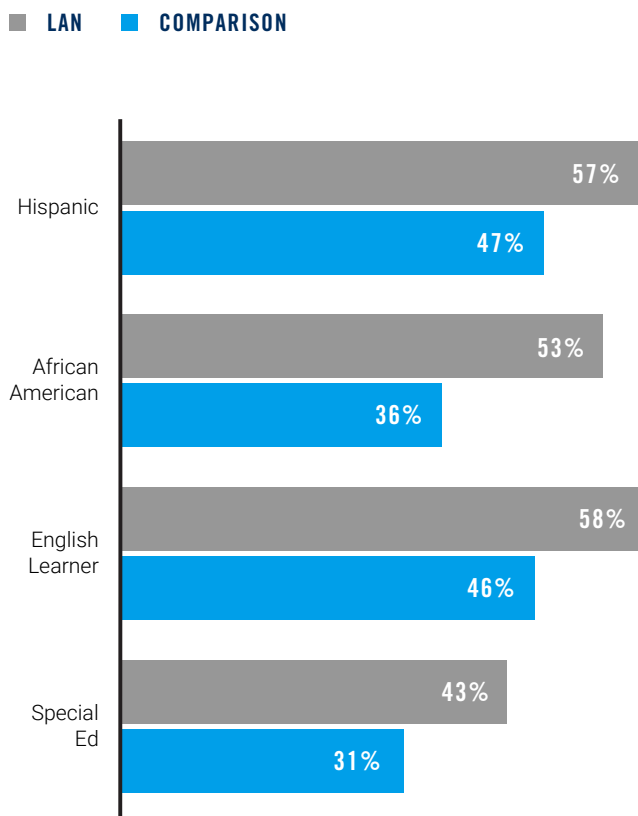


Source: Leadership Academy Network Annual Report 2020-2021



On the MAP test in math, all of LAN's major student groups also had higher percentages meeting or exceeding their growth goals by the end of the year than the same student groups in the district's comparison schools, with particularly large growth for African American students.

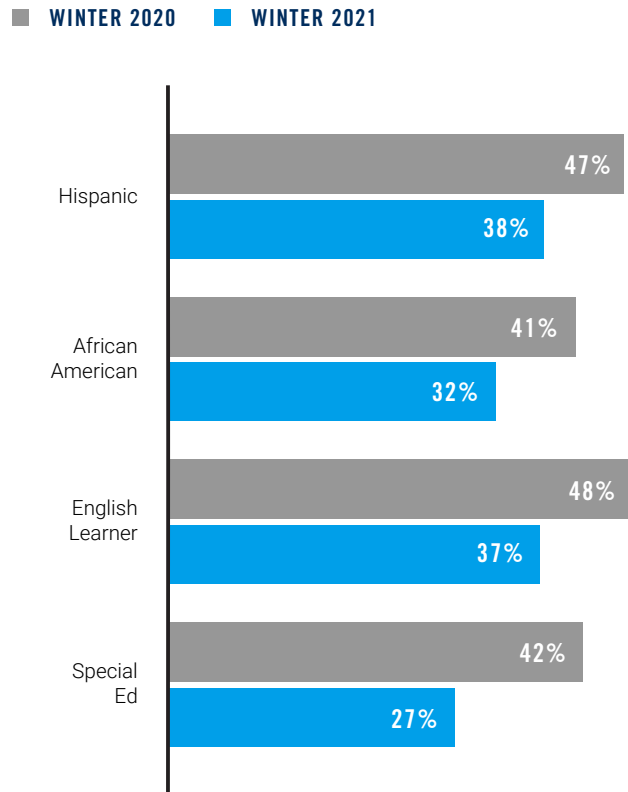
### NWEA MAP GROWTH IN MATH BY STUDENT SUBGROUP



Source: Leadership Academy Network Annual Report 2020-2021

On the MAP test in reading, all of LAN's major student groups also had higher percentages meeting or exceeding their growth goals by the end of the year than the same student groups in the district's comparison schools, with particularly large gains for LAN's English Learners and Special Education students, two groups uniquely impacted by the challenges of virtual learning.

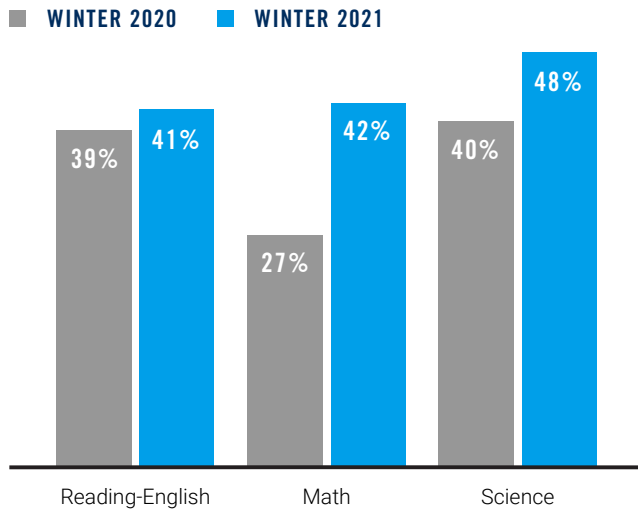
### NWEA MAP GROWTH IN READING ENGLISH BY STUDENT SUBGROUP



Source: Leadership Academy Network Annual Report 2020-2021

For the current school year of 2021-22, benchmark testing already shows some recovery relative to the same time in 2020-21. Reading, Math, and Science winter benchmarks all show higher percentages at the "Approaches Grade Level" standard as compared to the same time in 2020-21. The improvement was especially high in Math which, according to LAN, was the content area most negatively impacted by learning loss across the state during the pandemic.

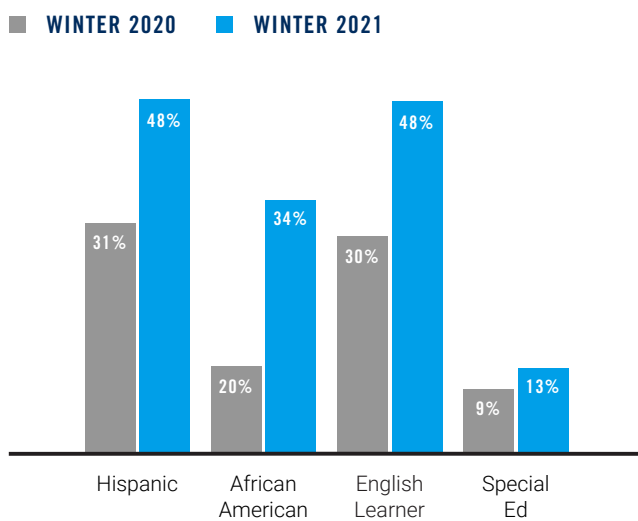
### WINTER BENCHMARK TESTING YEAR-TO-YEAR COMPARISON



Source: Leadership Academy Network Annual Report 2020-2021

Math gains over the prior year were seen for all major student groups, with especially large gains for English Learners and African American students.

### WINTER (DECEMBER 2021) BENCHMARKS - MATH



Source: Leadership Academy Network Annual Report 2020-2021

There is no doubt that LAN still has a lot of work to do between now and 2024. But it has survived arguably what have been the nation’s most challenging two school years since the Civil War.<sup>27</sup> And, its student outcomes are vastly improved from where the schools were prior to the turnaround when there was no pandemic to blame for poor performance. If the pandemic continues to ebb enough to permit students to consistently attend school in person for the next two years, there is a good chance that the network’s leaders and teachers have what it takes to achieve partnership’s contract goals.

### Sustaining Progress Toward the Goal

#### Everybody Grows

Dilley, her leadership team, and cadre of principals set high expectations for LAN’s teachers. They have to — LAN’s deadline for meeting its contract deliverables gets ever closer, and teacher excellence is a major pillar of its model. But LAN is acutely aware that teachers who do not receive proper supports and opportunities to “refill their wells” are unlikely to be effective teachers. During our school visits, teacher after teacher volunteered that the reason they stay — and thrive — at LAN is the unrelenting support from leadership. Another LAN principal, Shawn Buchanan, told me, “People at LAN are leading with their heart, you know they truly care about you.”



The support for teachers is both formal and informal. At Forest Oak Middle School, Seretha Lofton writes a “principal’s post” where she calls out teachers’ great work. She also puts names in a hat for gift cards as rewards for teachers. LAN’s Executive Director of Academics, Whitney Clark, appreciates Rainwater’s funding, some of which is permitted to be used for incentives for teachers. LAN’s executive team will sometimes deliver an Olive Garden take-out lunch to a school’s staff or send other treats to keep morale high and let staff know they are appreciated.

During the pandemic, LAN’s leadership had to help its principals find other ways to keep teachers’ energy up. This was especially true when the demands of remediating student learning loss made it apparent staff would have to work even harder, including holding class on 14 Saturdays throughout the 2021-2022 school year.

One new effort at increasing and maintaining “super great” culture: Canceling mandatory in-person faculty meetings. Instead, LAN moved the meetings’ content onto YouTube, where teachers could watch “on demand.” It also provided a platform where they could ask questions.

“Teachers might be single moms, they might have multiple kids playing multiple sports,” Dilley explained. “We are treating our teachers as professionals, not as children who have to be physically in front of us to get information.”

But LAN also recognizes that teachers do need time to interact together in person, so it created a formal in-person teacher support program. It launched just as COVID-19 was fomenting teacher burnout, exacerbating the acute teacher shortages now plaguing the nation.

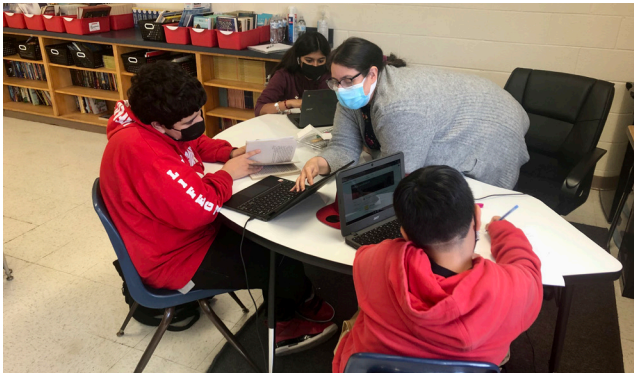
Every Friday afternoon teachers get uninterrupted time with their colleagues — with no students present — to plan what to do the next week, based on data about what happened the previous week. They:

- Set their instructional calendars
- Build student assessments for the Demonstration of Learning Charts
- Review the data from Demonstration of Learning Charts and assessments
- Use that data to inform instruction for the next week: decide what needs re-teaching, which students will be pulled for small groups, and how small groups will be taught.

### Small Group Learning

LAN pulls every student for a small group at some point, to avoid stigmatizing students. Every student is pulled into a small group for literacy based on their reading level. For example, those reading at level “M” are pulled into a group for level “N” to challenge them. Students in “tier three” (lowest level of learning) are pulled into small groups every day because they are considered an emergency.

The assistant principal at LAN Como Elementary school, Megan Pride, said the program is vitally important. “If you’re doing a schoolwide strategic instructional plan, you have to build this planning time in somewhere, she explained. “We already work a nine-hour day, which is one hour longer than district teachers. Teachers would burnout without this planning time and without it they wouldn’t keep coming back year after year like they do.”



LAN calls it the teacher support program “Everybody Grows” because, while teachers collaborate, students get enrichment. Under the supervision of a teaching assistant or counselor, students do three 55-minute rotations of activities like STEM projects, art, theater, music, dance, yoga, or socio-emotional exercises. LAN brings in external partners – like museums, libraries, and theater companies – to provide the activities. The programs rotate every six weeks to keep the content fresh and interesting. Sometimes the time is used for field trips to a zoo or a museum.

### Teacher Recruitment and Retention

Collaboration and planning time are vital to teachers’ mental health and effectiveness, but they don’t pay a teacher’s mortgage. When the state legislature created a new Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA) fund, LAN jumped at the chance to give its teachers bonuses without any additional expense to the network. Passed by the legislature in fall 2019, TIA is designed to help excellent teachers earn six-figure salaries. To qualify for a TIA grant, a school, charter network or district must show the TEA that it has designed and implemented a transparent compensation plan based on teacher effectiveness and student equity.

### TEACHER DESIGNATIONS' ANNUAL ALLOTMENTS



\$3-\$9K



\$6-\$18K



\$12-\$32K

With increased compensation organized into three tiers depending on teacher effectiveness, the state’s motive is reducing highly effective teachers’ desire to leave the classroom. At LAN, “effectiveness” is 70% based on student growth and 30% based on teacher evaluations.

The state’s motive for the bonuses is right in line with LAN’s philosophy. LAN carefully selects teachers for their effectiveness. Retaining them is key because great teachers are often hard to replace. LAN’s Clark provided an example: “While our principals have the autonomy to hire their teachers, we (network leadership) oversee it. Recently, a principal had an opening for a fourth grade teacher. She sent me one candidate’s test scores. They were under 50% (of students meeting growth standards). That says to me, there is a significant student population that this teacher is not reaching and that is simply unacceptable at LAN.” LAN declined to offer that candidate the position.

In the midst of a pandemic, even highly motivated teachers can be susceptible to burnout. Having the autonomy to move quickly to access state funds to pay teachers more — without costing LAN a cent — was key at a time when the pandemic was exacerbating teacher shortages. Clark explained, “FWISD also planned to apply for TIA, but because of our autonomy, we went first on our own.”

Rainwater’s Chris Shropshire, who also served as LAN’s first operations chief, also credits the network’s autonomy as an advantage for its leaders, observing, “Priscila knows her model and she is relentless in pursuing it.”

After the state approved LAN’s new compensation plan, the district asked to review it before submitting its own application during the state’s next round of TIA grants. The district, too, was awarded a TIA grant.

But Clark is careful to point out that even though LAN can sometimes move more quickly than the district because of its size, LAN still depends on the district for technical assistance, like human resource supports. She described the relationship as mutually supportive, saying, “We learn from each other.”

For example, when FWISD’s Chief Innovation Officer David Saenz offered LAN the opportunity to pilot a program for documenting campus improvement plans, the network agreed to try it for a year. After LAN gave the district its feedback, the district asked the vendor to tweak the product before it pushed the program out to its 143 other schools.

### **LAN Governance**

The Texas Wesleyan University Board of Trustees appointed a steering committee to

oversee and guide LAN. It focuses on:

- Risk management for the university;
- Partnership and strategy;
- Performance monitoring; and
- Public accountability.

It is comprised of nine members who serve in the Fort Worth community, include a Texas Wesleyan University Board of Trustees member, the president and CEO of the Rainwater Foundation, a school finance expert and several current and retired educators, including the former COO of the KIPP charter school network in St. Louis.

Meetings are public, like the districts’ school board meetings (in accordance with the Open Meetings Act). The trustees review and provide guidance on LAN initiatives and activities, and meetings serve as a forum for community engagement in the LAN effort.

LAN is also monitored by the FWISD. District leadership visits each school once a quarter, not, according to Deputy Superintendent Karen Molinar, for a formal “walk” or evaluation, but rather just for a check-up and to see if there are hiccups or supports missing. Dilley’s leadership team also periodically reports assessment data to the FWISD Board of Education Trustees.

### **Lessons Learned**

For those interested in the LAN partnership model, the innovation schools guide PPI published last year<sup>28</sup> includes extensive chapters on steps to effective implementation, lessons learned, and “dos and don’ts.” What follows are some specific lessons from the Texas statute and the Fort Worth initiative that are contributing

to LAN's success, and a few pitfalls to avoid.

***Recognize that being territorial over district schools is counterproductive to all parties:***

FWISD leadership recognized that it was far smarter and more productive to partner with an external partner rather than either (1) losing schools to state takeover; or (2) allowing schools to limp along to the detriment of the district and the students in those schools. In my interviews with them, FWISD Innovation Office leaders displayed no ego, appeared to embrace the partnership; and seemed genuinely grateful for the collaboration with Texas Wesleyan University. In fact, they are so pleased with the partnership model that have now embarked upon a second partnership with Indianapolis-based Phalen Leadership Academies.

In light of the severe learning loss induced by the pandemic, now is not the time for districts to cling to schools they can't manage well. Think of the resources districts could put elsewhere if they would loosen their grip on the minority of schools that gobble up a disproportionate amount of district assets.

***If your state has a partnership statute, make sure you understand it. If not, write your bill carefully.***

In most, if not all cases, a state statute similar to Texas' 1882 law will be necessary to effectively launch partnership schools. This is especially true in locations where the teachers unions are strong and would likely work to thwart partnership schools without the muscle of a state law to protect the district.

This is not a theoretical threat. While Colorado passed an innovation school statute in 2008, the law's protections for innovation schools are weaker than those in the state's charter school

law. As a result, the Denver Public Schools Board, which has seen its composition change from a majority of pro-reform directors to a majority of anti-reform directors, has spent the past three years seeking to strip the district's innovation schools of their autonomies. Specifically, the Board is currently trying to force Denver's innovation schools to adhere to the district's school calendar and has all but passed a measure to strip innovation schools' right to waive the teachers union collective bargaining agreement. The loss of these autonomies would probably gut Denver's innovation schools' effectiveness.

As mentioned, Texas' SB 1882 spelled out certain autonomies districts are required to give their partner in order for the district to qualify for the extra funding: freedom over staffing decisions, the budget and the curriculum. Everything else must be negotiated. A better model is Indiana, where that state's statute<sup>29</sup> provides blanket autonomies, rather than requiring piecemeal negotiation.

Failure to understand what the statute guarantees and what must be negotiated hurt some Texas partnership schools in the early days of 1882. Seth Rau, of Empower Schools, explains, "In San Antonio Independent School District, for example, Democracy Prep and Relay school didn't ask the district for the same things." Rau continued, "Your leverage is at the beginning. If you don't negotiate all your autonomies up front you lose the opportunity. Some San Antonio operators made mistakes in not doing that."

Lindsay Denman, Partnerships Manager in the TEA Charter School Office, is one of the department employees who decide whether a district-partner contract sufficiently meets TEA

autonomy standards to warrant the award of state 1882 funds. She emphasized that it is the parties' responsibility to come to terms on the topics that are negotiable — TEA won't mediate sticking points. In spite of that policy, she says there is confusion about the TEA's role. "The media always gets it wrong," she said. "TEA does not approve partnership schools or charters. We don't have the authority. We only approve the 1882 money if the partners wrote a contract that at minimum provides reasonable autonomy. The TEA is the floor, not the ceiling for autonomy."

In the early days of 1882, the floor was lower than it is now. Denman explains that at first, the rules governing 1882 were too lax. She described receiving near constant calls from partners claiming that the district was denying "autonomy X, Y, or Z." Her standard response was, "What does your contract say? You cannot demand an autonomy you didn't negotiate."

TEA has now revised its rules in an effort to better protect nonprofit partners from district micromanagement. Denman explains, "We got very clear about saying, 'We will not give you your money unless these particular autonomies (staffing, budget and curriculum) are in the contract!'" Still, TEA lacks manpower to police districts who interfere with their partners' day-to-day management of their school.

Denman remains hopeful that TEA will further improve its monitoring of the 1882 partnerships, but even then, she expects the emphasis will be on partner performance, rather than district violations of contractual autonomy agreements. While we did not observe this to be a big problem in Fort Worth where the relationship between FWISD and LAN appears cooperative, in other places in Texas there have been complaints about districts taking 1882

monies while infringing on autonomies and micromanaging partner schools. Strengthening monitoring over this behavior would be an excellent next amendment to the statute.

### *Choose a trusted partner:*

From the outset, the level of trust between the school district and Texas Wesleyan smoothed the way, not only during the contract negotiations but during the transition to autonomous governance and even through the challenges of the pandemic. FWISD Deputy Superintendent Molinar recalled, "The trust for the first partnership was there with the university, because we already have had a long relationship with them. We said, 'We know who these people are and we can trust them.' We liked that their focus was on partnering, not coming in and taking over, but combining the might of the two organizations and putting everything we've both got into the schools."

Dr. Martinez agreed that trust was the key to their eventual agreement to partner in creating the LAN. "They knew we would be a good partner, not just because of our product, but because of our desire to collaborate, to find solutions and options for variables. That trust is the anchor to the project."

If you do not have a trusted partner like the Fort Worth district does in Texas Wesleyan, start networking and developing relationships to seek one out.

### *Develop a common vision:*

Texas Wesleyan and the district had long, deep, and thorough discussions to develop the schools' design and to hammer out other details. It is hard to imagine that trusted partners engaged in that degree of discussion would frequently fail to be on the same page when it

came time to execute. Certainly, between LAN and FWISD there have been some pinch points over specific issues, including procurement and use of government funds. However, neither party reported major surprises or serious conflicts, in part due to their extensive planning. During the planning process, work through every scenario in and around every aspect of the school, including athletics, per pupil costs, legal services, assessments and so forth. Peer around the corners and address any issue that might trip up the relationship downstream.

### ***Engage a third party or parties to help guide negotiations and design:***

LAN was fortunate to have the Richard Rainwater Foundation, which provided both a both physical space for the negotiations and thought leadership on the partnership, with Rainwater's Sarah Geer taking the lead as point person on the schools' design.

Geer explained, "As a funding partner, we wanted to be at the table for negotiations."

FWISD had laid the design groundwork during its initial reconstitution of the schools — by adopting the ACE model — but enough planning and fine tuning remained that the two sides met weekly for seven months in Rainwater's office. Dr. Martinez laughed, "I spent more time in Rainwater's office than I did in my own."

Rainwater also brought in an organization called Empower Schools to help guide the work. Empower Schools is a nonprofit founded in Massachusetts in 2013. Empower has helped dozens of districts launch autonomous or "Empowerment Zone" schools, including nine 1882 partnerships with 29 campuses across 10 districts in Texas. It also helps rural counties, including three rural Texas counties,

create regional education collaboratives that partners school districts with higher education institutions and local businesses. The multi-county partnerships give rural students increased choices to ensure they are equipped for college and career and encourage workforce development to meet regional industry needs.

In Fort Worth, Empower was tasked with keeping the district and the university on track to meet the deadline to submit their 1882 funding application to TEA. It also helped the parties craft the agreements for LAN's governance and quality metrics. And it played a vital role in helping the district's central office understand — in every department — how the LAN schools would be quite different from the district's other schools.

Empower's work with the FWISD central office's departments was key because, as other districts implementing similar models have learned, if the bureaucrats in the central office aren't "bought in" to the idea of autonomous schools, they can create all kinds of headaches for the partners operating them.

Empower isn't the only entity doing this work. In Indianapolis, The Mind Trust incubated that district's innovation schools. So, there is talent out there with deep experience in this work — don't try to go it alone if this is new to your state or district! Organizations like the aforementioned are passionate about the work and they will save you time, money, and headaches later. As Rainwater's Geer and Shropshire told me, "We were honored to be trusted. We realized that the district and the university were asking us to help birth their baby and that's pretty cool."

### ***Ensure that the school has a mission:***

With regard to failing schools and turnaround work, Shropshire advises asking what he calls



“the core” question: “What does it take to serve students who are chronically underserved and often lack stability in the home?” In this case, FWISD and TXWES decided it was a core instructional model relentlessly centered on data, aggressive monitoring and mastery of content. Once you find your mission, everything — spending, staffing, curriculum, assessments, calendar, wraparound services, and so forth must be tightly aligned to furthering that mission. Without that consistent, relentless alignment, schools are much more likely to flounder, whether they are in turnaround mode or not.

***Find — beg, borrow, steal or incubate if necessary — a strong passionate leader who is willing “to be married to the mission.”***

Priscila Dilley's drive and perseverance in pursuing her schools' mission stands out. Rainwater's Chris Shropshire, who also served as LAN's first operations chief sums it up, “Priscila knows her mission and model and she is relentless in pursuing it. She is always thinking, “How can I pull in more resources to accelerate the model's outcomes?”

Dilley self-deprecatingly explains that her doggedness on behalf of LAN, “It comes from being a preacher's kid. Parents like that put a lot of fences around you, so you learn to push out the boundaries,” she said.

That's what you want.

### ***One last lesson:***

Don't compromise any of the fundamentals, such as true school autonomy, real accountability, expanding the diversity of learning models, and choice for families through a system they find accessible and easy to use. There are boundless examples of districts that took half measures, wasted a lot of time and

money, and got poor results. It's happening in some places in Texas, even with its fairly strong partnership school statute. In some cases, according to TEA's Lindsay Denman, a rush to avoid state takeover, rather than actually improving the schools and creating better student outcomes, was some districts' real motive. In others, the lure of extra funding from the state was strong. If your heart's not in it for the right reason, or the hearts of the decisionmakers in your district aren't, better to step back and work on changing the political climate first.

### **CONCLUSION**

Fort Worth Independent School District and Texas Wesleyan University put forth tremendous effort to push their partnership deal across the finish line. The timing for LAN's first school year, on one hand, was terrible. COVID closed schools and canceled state assessments at the precise moment that the LAN most needed proof points. On the other hand, the timing could be viewed as quite lucky. If either the district or the university could have used a crystal ball to see what the spring semester of 2020 would bring, even the bravest of hearts in Fort Worth might have run for the hills rather than close the partnership deal.

And, after visiting the LAN to see its schools for ourselves, we are glad that didn't happen. LAN's administrators, teachers, teachers' aides — even security guards and janitors — seem to be pulling hard in the same direction, all with the same, student-centered goal. The urgency we witnessed is an interesting juxtaposition from some traditional school systems that are, now two full school years into the pandemic, winnowing down students' learning time,<sup>30</sup> and infuriating parents in the process.<sup>31</sup>

Parents have made it clear time<sup>32</sup> and again during the ordeal of the past two years<sup>33</sup> that they want more, not less,<sup>34</sup> choice when it comes to their children's education. Some are voting with their feet. Between 1.1 million<sup>35</sup> and 1.7 million<sup>36</sup> students disenrolled from traditional public schools from the 2019-2020 school year through the end of the 2020-2021 school year. Finally, it appears we have reached a moment in time when there seems to be a broad public consensus that yesterday's bureaucratic and highly centralized K-12 school model is not "the one true way" to deliver public education for all times.

Instead of letting our public school districts continue to shrink, why not reinvent them using autonomous partnerships like the LAN to increase choice, transparency, and a diversity of models? In Fort Worth and other places, it appears to be a sound way to feed the public's post-pandemic hunger for sweeping changes in their K-12 schools.

All children deserve quality schools and a chance to rebound from the disruption the last two years caused in their attainment of the knowledge and skills they need to live productive lives. Not just in the time of a pandemic, but especially in the wake of one, it's time to acknowledge that new school models like the LAN aren't a threat to the public education ideal. Rather, they could be the way to save it.

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## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Tressa Pankovits is the Co-Director of Reinventing America's Schools project at Progressive Policy institute, which researches innovations needed to create a 21st century model for public education that is geared to the knowledge economy. A lawyer with more than 10 years of experience in domestic and international education policy, management, and operations, Tressa is a national thought leader and passionate advocate for autonomous school models that increase educational equity. In addition to guiding the project's strategic plan, Tressa's research and advocacy have appeared in the Washington Post, The Hill, Real Clear Education, The 74Million, and other publications. She has published numerous white papers and model legislation.



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Today, PPI is developing fresh proposals for stimulating U.S. economic innovation and growth; equipping all Americans with the skills and assets that social mobility in the knowledge economy requires; modernizing an overly bureaucratic and centralized public sector; and defending liberal democracy in a dangerous world.

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