

# Texas spotlight schools: High-poverty schools that are raising the bar

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*With special acknowledgment to the*

*DFER Texas Team*

## I. EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

It is widely acknowledged that students from low-income backgrounds often face significant barriers to accessing quality education, and these challenges have only been exacerbated by the disruptions brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic. Demography does not, however, always have to equal destiny. Despite systemic inequities, there are shining examples of schools with high percentages of students from low-income backgrounds that have achieved remarkable success in either student proficiency, student growth, or both.

This report aims to showcase that strong academic achievement is attainable even within Texas's highest poverty schools. By examining the strategies and practices implemented by these "spotlight schools" via surveys and interviews with school leaders, we seek to uncover what has worked to achieve these positive academic outcomes. We identified 62 high-poverty schools<sup>1</sup> that have achieved high proficiency rates<sup>2</sup> or demonstrated significant growth<sup>3</sup> in math and/or ELA on the 2023<sup>4</sup> Student Assessment for Academic Readiness (STAAR).

1 We define high-poverty schools as those where the number of students receiving free or reduced price lunch is in the fourth quartile (>88.4%) for the state of Texas.

2 We define high-proficiency schools as those where at least 70% of students met or exceeded expectations in math and/or ELA on the 2023 STAAR.

3 We define high-growth schools as those that had annual growth rates of at least 85% in math and/or ELA in 2023.

4 At the time of this report's publication, 2023 is the most recent year of school-level data.

While there is no singular formula for fostering academic excellence, leaders of these Texas spotlight schools shared four common themes:

1. **Data-Driven Decision-Making:** Frequent data cycles and live data are vital for monitoring mastery of state standards, informing appropriate student interventions, and providing targeted professional development and coaching. This strategy requires that principals build data literacy among fellow administrators, teachers, and students so that they understand how to collect and utilize data to improve outcomes.
2. **Small Group Instruction:** Identifying students who are falling behind and providing tailored, small-group instruction to address knowledge gaps is essential to support all students in achieving mastery of state standards.
3. **High Quality Instructional Materials:** Evidence-based curricula coupled with aligned educator supports are essential for providing effective core instruction.
4. **Capacity Building:** Competitive salaries, meaningful professional development, and targeted coaching are vital components of attracting, retaining, and supporting effective teachers.

To encourage these school- and district-level strategies, Texas has statewide policies aligned with each of these four themes, including: strong, aligned state standards through the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), High-Impact Tutoring (HB 4545 & HB 1416), High-Quality Instructional Materials (HB 1605), and the Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA). Spotlight schools participated in these opportunities at higher rates than other, lower-performing schools, leveraging state funding and guidance to launch new initiatives.





Ortiz Elementary

## II. DATA ANALYSIS

In order to identify a list of spotlight schools, we analyzed campus data from the 2022-23 Texas Academic Performance Reports, including demographic data, STAAR proficiency rates, and school progress annual growth scores.

### Proficiency Rates

We define academic proficiency as the percent of students that met or exceeded expectations on the 2023 STAAR. The correlation between school poverty rates and academic proficiency in Texas is strong ( $r = -0.66$  for ELA and  $r = -0.75$  for math), though not as strong as in Massachusetts and Colorado (states studied in previous [Spotlight Schools briefs](#)). This means that between 43-57% of the variance in student achievement can be attributed to school poverty, while the remaining 43-57% is influenced by other factors. Simply put, while poverty is a strong predictor of student outcomes, other elements – such as the quality of a school and its educators – also play a crucial role.

While Massachusetts and Colorado both experience ceilings on academic achievement, whereby their highest poverty schools do not exceed proficiency rates of about 65%, these ceilings do not exist in Texas. For the quartile of Texas schools with the highest

poverty rates (>88.4%), proficiency rates range from 0% to 98%. In other words, while some states see a cap on achievement in high-poverty schools, Texas shows a wider range of outcomes. Still, in most of Texas's highest poverty schools, a minority of students are meeting grade-level expectations.

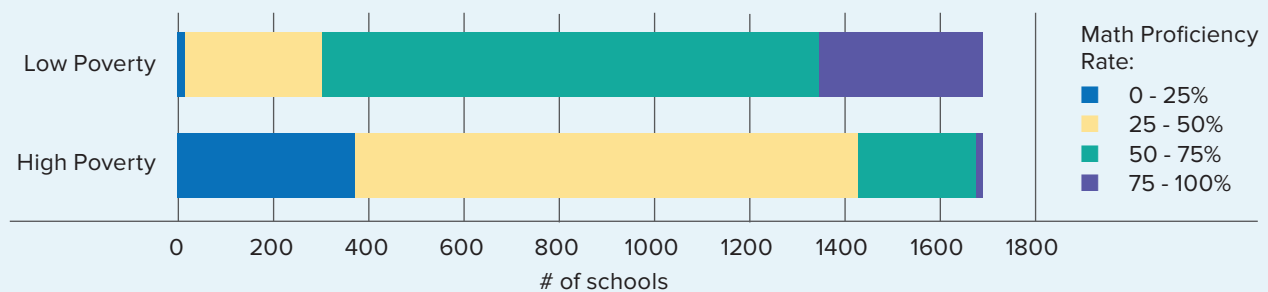


Montana Vista Elementary

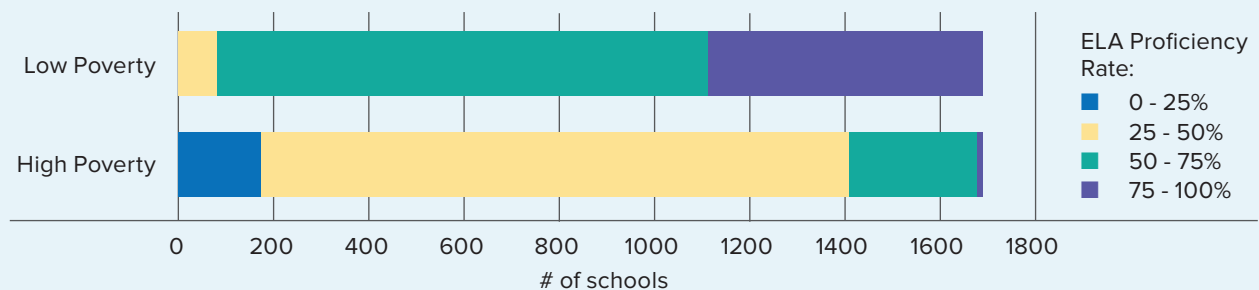


St. Anthony

### Comparing Math Proficiency Rates in Low and High Poverty Schools



### Comparing ELA Proficiency Rates in Low and High Poverty Schools



## Academic Growth

In Texas, annual growth for the 2022-2023 school year is [calculated](#) based on points awarded for student growth between [enhanced proficiency levels](#) relative to the total number of assessments.<sup>5</sup> The [average annual growth rates](#)<sup>6</sup> for elementary and middle schools in Texas are 66% for math and 63% for ELA. The correlation between school poverty and annual growth is moderate ( $r = -0.54$  for ELA and  $r = -0.36$  for math).

- Underlying data would be needed to run cohort analyses and calculate YOY growth, but for the purposes of this brief, growth is calculated based on TEA's point system for the [school progress domain](#): the denominator is the total number of assessments, and the numerator is the total number of points earned for Annual Growth plus 0.25 multiplied by the total number of points earned for Accelerated learning.
- The 2023 annual growth rate has also been affected by the [STAAR redesign](#), which included universal online administration, new question types, and cross-curricular passages.

### III. IDENTIFYING AND ASSESSING SPOTLIGHT SCHOOLS

In sum, we identified a list of 62 high-poverty elementary and middle schools that demonstrated high academic proficiency or significant academic growth according to the 2022-2023 STAAR administration. We define high-poverty schools as those where the number of students receiving free or reduced price lunch (FRPL) is in the fourth quartile (>88.4%) for the state of Texas.

These 62 schools represent a diverse variety of school models, including traditional public schools and public charter schools, across 29 different districts in various geographical locations (see Appendix A).

25 schools were identified for their high proficiency rates, meaning at least 70% of students met or exceeded expectations. Of these:

- 15 schools were identified for ELA proficiency
- 18 schools were identified for math proficiency
- 8 schools were identified for both ELA and math proficiency

We also identified 46 schools for growth, meaning they had annual growth rates of at least 85%. Of these:

- 45 schools were identified for math growth
- 1 school was identified for ELA growth
- 9 schools were identified for both high growth and high proficiency rates

Note that the benchmarks for spotlight schools are significantly higher in Texas compared to the analyses we conducted for Colorado and Massachusetts. In Texas, the highest poverty quartile includes schools where 88.4% of students qualify for FRPL, while the cutoffs in Colorado and Massachusetts are notably lower at 68.1% and 66.4%, respectively. Additionally, high-proficiency spotlight schools in Texas boast proficiency rates above 70%, whereas the “above-average” threshold in Colorado and Massachusetts falls below 50% (with variation in each state and subject). This means that many Texas schools marginally fell below the exceptionally high cutoffs defined in this



*Forest Hill Elementary*

analysis, yet they still exhibit strong student outcomes in the face of concentrated poverty.

While these comparisons are helpful in contextualizing the spotlight schools analyses, each state uses a different summative assessment with different cut scores for proficiency. True cross-state comparisons can only be made using the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP). On average, Colorado and Massachusetts significantly outperform Texas in math and ELA proficiency on the NAEP (with the exception of Colorado’s fourth grade math scores). However, the NAEP score gap between students who do and do not qualify for FRPL is substantially smaller in Texas than it is for Colorado and Massachusetts, especially in the eighth grade



Ortiz  
Elementary

## IV. UNDERSTANDING STRATEGIES FOR SUCCESS

To understand the policies and programs that might have driven these strong academic outcomes, we disseminated a survey (See Appendix B) and conducted follow-up interviews with the principals and superintendents of each identified spotlight school. We identified the following themes and levers for success.

### ***Data-Driven Decision-Making***

School principals report a great degree of data-driven decision-making, with heavy reliance on “Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills” (“TEKS”) – specific, benchmarked standards that are aligned with the state’s summative assessment. These decisions include which specific TEKS to focus on, how to target interventions to small groups or individual students based on patterns on TEKS attainment, and whether to add additional learning time.

### ***Key Policy Lever: Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)***

TEKS serve as the Texas state instructional standards and are directly aligned with STAAR. They define clear, specific, and detailed benchmarks for what students are expected to learn in each course, subject, and grade level, and they go through a very rigorous review process. TEKS are deeply institutionalized, and they serve to guide school districts as well as ensure consistency across the state.

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### ***Data Cycles***

Several principals reported having biannual benchmark assessments (often modeled after STAAR) as well as district-level formative assessments every 4-8 weeks to ensure mastery of TEKS. Principal Julie Peña describes that at Ortiz Elementary in Brownsville ISD:

We monitor data on a regular basis to help identify the TEKS that have not yet been mastered and plan targeted instruction....  
**If students are missing a TEKS, then we regroup the students and we make sure that we’re giving them lessons that are geared toward learning those skills. So if a student is falling behind, they are asked to participate in tutorials, they are asked to come on Saturdays, and they’re given the reviews targeted to what it is that they’re missing.”**

Similarly, Principal Delisa Morales shares that at IDEA Carver College Prep:

**“We track our scholars’ progress towards their growth goals.... we use data to plan reteaches, determine small groups, intervention plans, after school tutoring focuses and Saturday School sessions.”**



Beyond student-level data, Principal Laura Flack ensures that at IDEA Carver Academy:

Data is “broken down to make sure that our teacher is closing gaps with not only individual students, but whole groups of students too,” including special education students, bilingual students, and students who performed poorly on the previous year’s STAAR administration.

### ***Building Data Literacy***

While it has long been known that data-driven decision-making is imperative to school success, these processes require **strong leadership** and **accessible data infrastructure** to effectively implement. It is often the principal’s responsibility to build **data literacy** among teachers so that they feel comfortable operating within a school’s unique data infrastructure and making appropriate, informed decisions once data is collected.

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#### ***Live Data***

In addition to consistent and comprehensive data cycles, many spotlight schools commended the use of “live” or immediate data to monitor daily mastery of content, which Principal Flack describes as “one of the most impactful” uses of data within Carver Academy. She shares that:

**Student success is monitored through daily progress monitoring in the form of exit tickets. Teachers are expected to address misconceptions the next day for all students not yet reaching mastery.”**

Exit tickets are “strategically designed” by Carver Academy administrators to assess content mastery consistently across classes, and teachers are tasked with presenting data and determining appropriate instructional adjustments and interventions during daily “exit ticket huddles.”

Similarly, at Forest Hill Elementary in Amarillo ISD, teachers use **Pear Deck** to “monitor student responses to short constructed questions or skill practice to determine if students are understanding or need to be pulled back into discussion.”

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Principal Flack shares the importance of Carver Academy’s leadership in building data literacy:

**We model how to collect the data. We model what we’re thinking as educators, and then from there we model what to do with that data.”** The process often starts with teaching teachers how to enter daily exit ticket scores into their Excel tracker, and from there, leadership conducts “student work analysis meetings,” which serve as “five minute quick checks” to help teachers understand what the data tells them and how to take action. The end goal, Flack says, is to “break it down into baby steps, model, coach, give feedback. And then over and over again until they have the data literacy that we do.”

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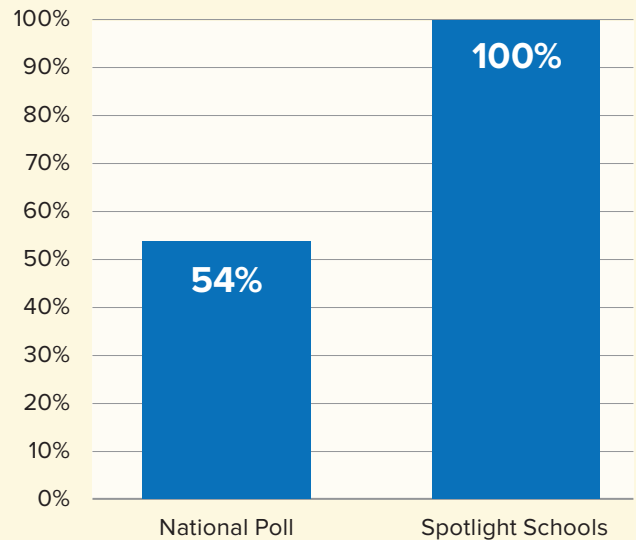
Beyond empowering educators with data, many spotlight leaders emphasized the importance of empowering students and families with data. Principal Amy Alarcon shares that at Ysleta Elementary in Ysleta ISD:

**Data is at the center of our student agency initiative....** Teachers have held true to student agency and making students aware of their own data, setting goals through conferencing one-on-one, and celebrating success frequently.... Students track their data on math and reading programs and use district checkpoints to identify TEKS they need to focus on.”

This emphasis on data-driven instruction aligns with research that **consistently underscores** the power of data use in education. For example, **one study** on urban schools found that there are significant links between teacher and principal data use and student achievement in math and reading in elementary and middle school. School-level supports for data use—including data infrastructure, adequate time to review and discuss data, and professional development—are also linked to higher achievement in these grades and subjects.

However, such consistent and systematized uses of data are not the norm. **In a 2020 poll from the Data Quality Campaign, only 31% of teachers strongly agreed that they had access to the student data they needed, and 46% of teachers said they did not receive trainings or resources about how to assess student learning and progress. In contrast, 100% of the spotlight principals who completed our survey indicated that data and assessment strategies were a very or extremely important topic for professional development.**

### % of Schools Providing Trainings on How to Assess Student Learning and Progress



### Small Group Instruction

#### Key Policy Lever: HB 4545 & HB 1416 Accelerated Instruction (High-Impact Tutoring)

HB 1416 (88R) which built upon HB 4545 (87R) ensures that students who fail to perform satisfactorily on the STAAR are provided accelerated instruction, such as high-impact tutoring, for a minimum of 15-30 hours depending on students’ performance levels.

One of the most critical uses of data is to drive decisions about which students need more personalized instruction and what content should be prioritized. Educators often monitor TEKS mastery to identify students for interventions, drive grouping decisions, and make adjustments when necessary. For example, at Carver Academy, principals and assistant principals meet with teachers every week during their lesson planning time to create data-driven “individualized plans for each child,” which involves identifying 15-minute “quick teaches,” 45-minute intervention periods, or after school tutoring depending on a child’s needs.

The vocabulary for these interventions tends to be inconsistent – as high impact tutoring (HIT), small-group instruction, intervention blocks, and Texas-mandated “accelerated instruction” all serve similar roles with slightly varied guardrails.

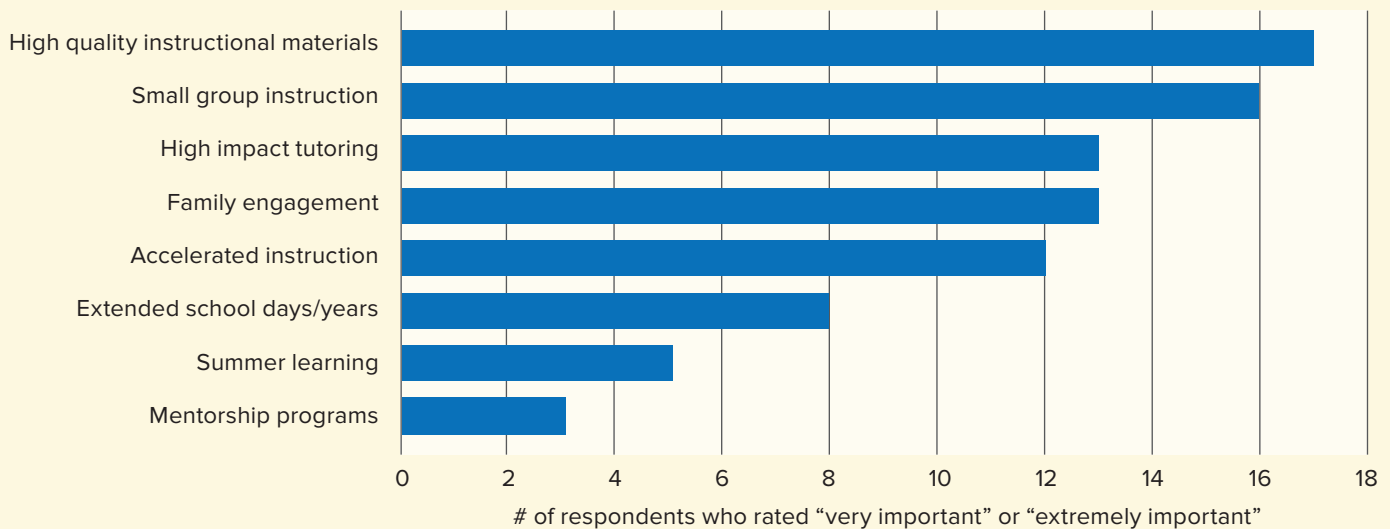
However, **all 18 survey respondents ranked accelerated learning, HIT, and/or small group instruction as very or extremely important to their success.**

The effectiveness of small group instruction has been consistently **underscored** by researchers, who concur that high-impact tutoring is **the most effective intervention** for improving academic achievement.

The consistent findings of national analyses are **commended** in Texas, as a **meta-analysis** of high-quality tutoring programs found that students made, on average, five months of additional progress compared to those not receiving tutoring.

While Texas has robust legislation around accelerated instruction, schools often confront difficulties with funding, personnel, and chronic absenteeism during implementation. Freddy Delgado, Superintendent of Amigos Por Vida Charter Schools, shared that accelerated instruction “has to change because we have more kids that need it than people available.” These problems are expected to escalate as ESSER funds expire this year: Principal Bethany Rose shares that **“We’ve been lucky with the ESSER money in the past to be able to hire a lot of tutors, but that’s going away.** So, we’re trying to figure out how to be creative this year and the upcoming year.”

### How important were each of the following interventions in helping your school generate such remarkable outcomes?



### High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM)

#### Key Policy Lever: HB 1605 Instructional Materials Review and Approval for HQIM

HB 1605 changed how Texas recognizes and approves curricula, creating a state process for **identifying** and **funding** High-Quality Instructional Materials (HQIM). While implementation of HB 1605 is still in development at time of this report’s publishing, Texas HQIM pilot programs **saw success** among participating districts.

**All 18 survey respondents ranked HQIM as very or extremely important. All 18 principals also indicated that instructional strategies are a very or extremely important topic for professional development, and an additional 15 respondents said curriculum implementation is a topic of similar importance – indicating that both evidence-based curricula and aligned educator training are essential components of success.**

For example, Forest Hill Elementary received a grant to purchase the **Amplify Reading curriculum** – a paced curriculum with a “strong phonics program.” Teachers were hesitant to adopt the new curriculum at first but were provided with coaching and monitoring, and “student outcomes have improved tremendously” as a result.





Ysleta Elementary

Supporting educators through such a transition is vital to ensuring that the new curriculum is taught with fidelity and that its impact is fully realized. Dr. Onjaleke Brown, Superintendent at St. Anthony Charter School, shares that:

“Teachers have to trust that if we’re making some kind of change like this, it is in the best interest of students. And so there’s a lot of work on culture and climate that has to be done before you even make that kind of attempt.”

Principal Flack also emphasizes the importance of leadership development:

“We start with our leaders getting professional development, because when teachers get frustrated, we have to be the ones that can step in and model.”

Once that foundation of trust and expertise is built, several spotlight school leaders emphasize a strong infrastructure of support a for teachers:

“Principal Morales has “implemented strong first lessons by utilizing lesson rehearsals, strong lesson plan feedback, and real-time feedback in the classroom. We emphasize the importance of lesson internalizations and lesson exemplars. We focus on quality coaching to drive results.”

This priority among spotlight leaders aligns with [consistent evidence](#) that curriculum choices matter deeply for student outcomes. One [IES study](#) found that instructional materials have an impact [at least as large](#) as that of teacher quality. More recently, the [IMPD Network](#) launched by the Council of Chief State School Officers has demonstrated across its 13 member states that HQIM, when coupled with professional development, [significantly improves](#) student achievement. Further, states providing clear signals and incentives for HQIM adoption, such as Texas’s HB 1605, see higher rates of effective use, which correlates with better educational outcomes.

## Capacity Building

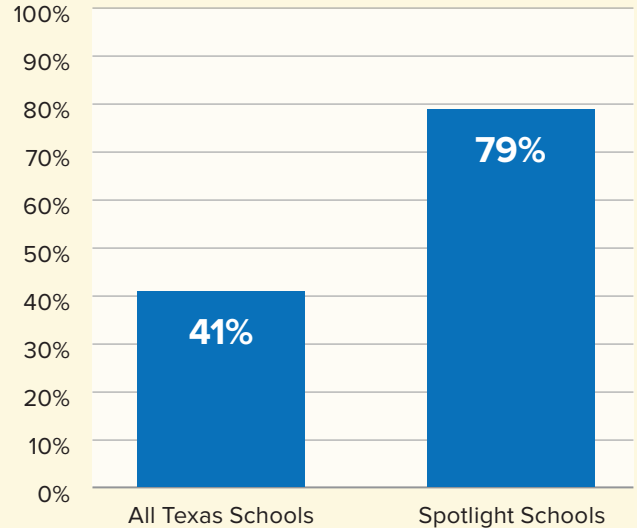
### Key Policy Lever: Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA)

TIA was created in 2019 to incentivize and reward effective teachers based on student growth measures, teacher observation scores, and other locally-determined criteria (such as student and parent surveys). In 2023, over **\$145 million** was distributed across **346 districts** to reward effective teachers.

### Competitive Salaries

Seventeen of our 18 survey respondents agreed that competitive salaries are very or extremely important, making it the most highly rated strategy for attracting, retaining, and supporting high-quality educators. Additionally, another 10 respondents ranked performance-based bonuses as of similar importance. In fact, **79% of spotlight schools opt into the Teacher Incentive Allotment, compared to just 41% of schools across Texas.** In 2024, retention rates for TIA-designated teachers were **8.1% higher** than those for non-designated teachers – a particularly compelling statistic given that teacher retention tends to be a **pervasive challenge** for high-poverty schools.

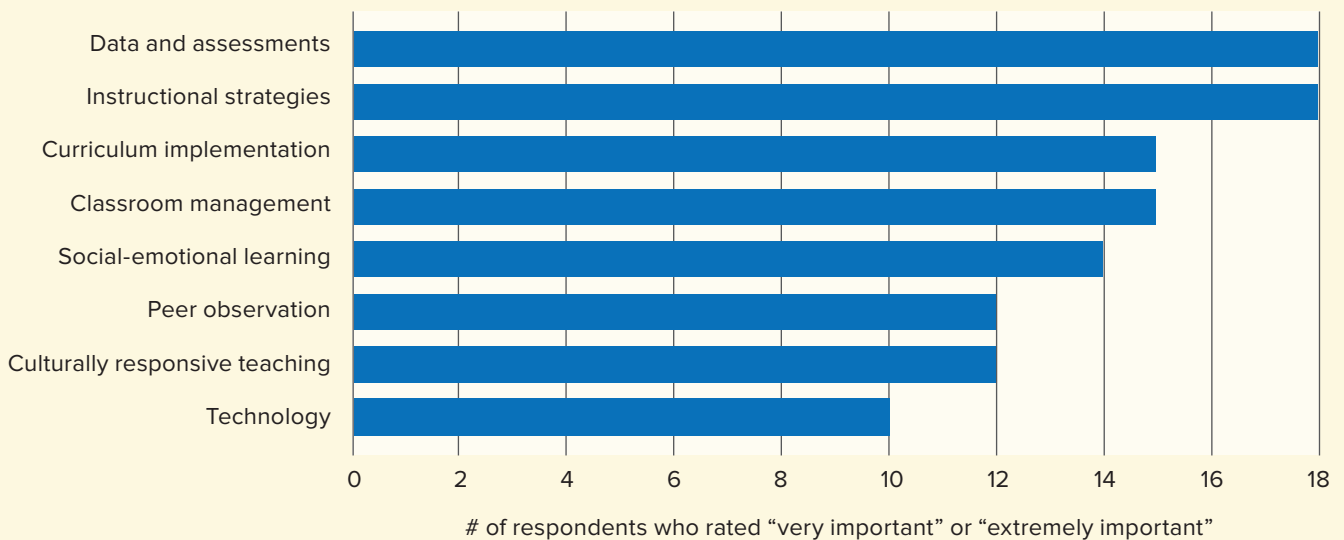
### % of Schools Participating in the Teacher Incentive Allotment



Based on calculations from the 2023-24 Allotment Funding Data from [tiatexas.org](http://tiatexas.org)

### Professional development

### How important were each of the following professional development topics/approaches in boosting educator effectiveness?





*Amigos Por Vida*

Fourteen principals indicated that professional development (PD) was very or extremely important in retaining and supporting principals, with the most popular topics being: data and assessment practices, instructional strategies, curriculum implementation, and classroom management.

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Principal Flack has implemented robust, data-driven PD cycles at Carver Academy:

Each week, campus administrators collect data through cultural and instructional observations” using the GET Rubric (similar to the T-TESS Rubric used in Texas’s traditional public schools). **These rubrics, alongside classroom climate data, exit ticket data, and disciplinary data, are then “reviewed, and professional development is created to address areas of need across the campus.** Teachers participate in campus professional development weekly to address identified gaps quickly and efficiently. To support administrator growth, teachers provide feedback at the end of each professional development session regarding relevance and effectiveness.”

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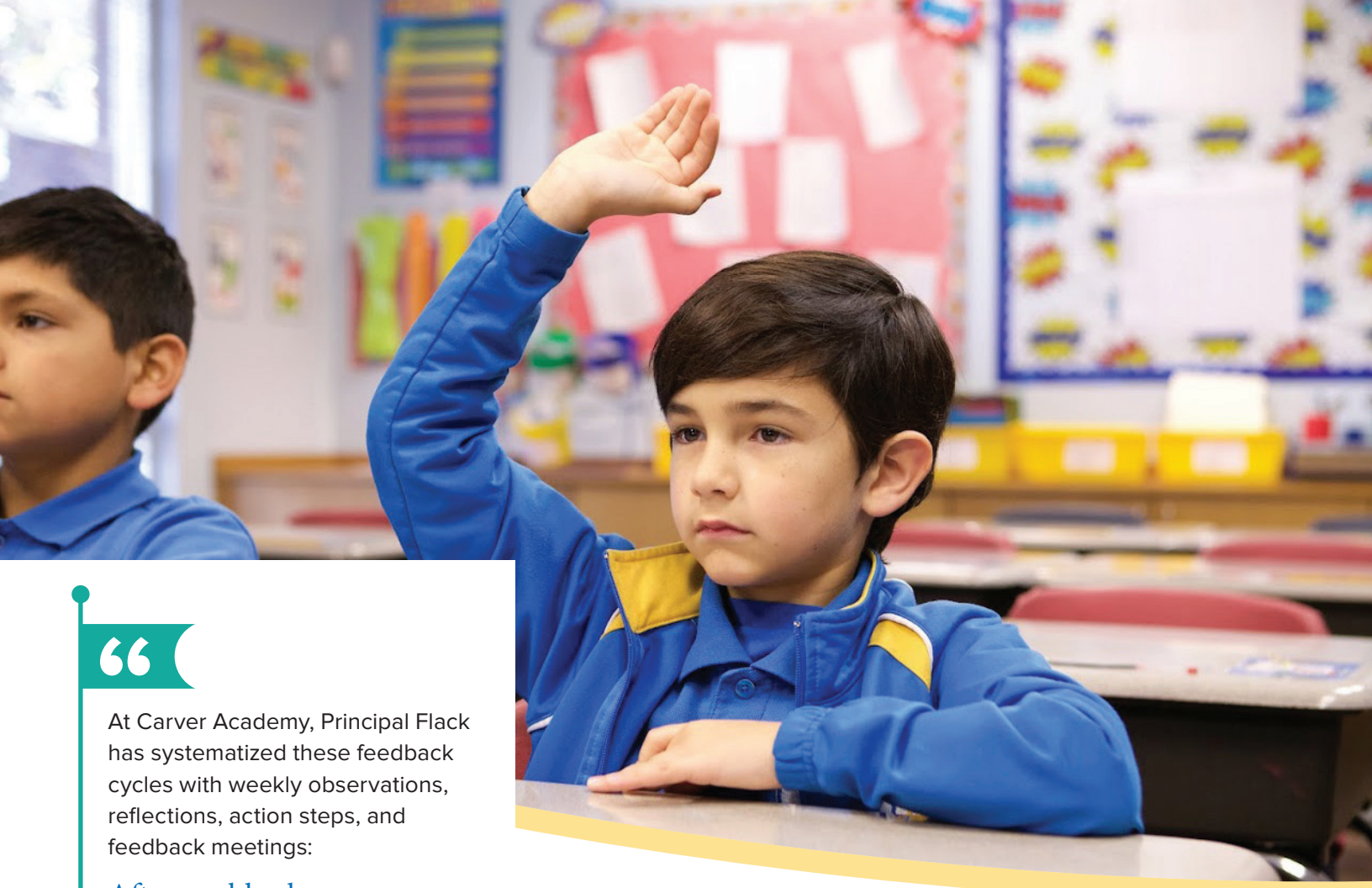
### **Coaching**

According to Superintendent Delgado:

**There’s professional development out there, but if it’s a sit and get, and there’s no follow up, then you just wasted money... you have to implement the change, but you also have to supervise the change.** And if you don’t follow through on the supervision part, then the teachers are going to go back to what is easier for them.”

At Amigos Por Vida Charter Schools, Superintendent Delgado has instructional coaches to manage this supervision:

“Our instructional coaches are instrumental in going into the classroom, supporting the teachers, and making sure that what they’re teaching and how they’re teaching are the best practices.”



*IDEA Carver*

“

At Carver Academy, Principal Flack has systematized these feedback cycles with weekly observations, reflections, action steps, and feedback meetings:

After weekly classroom observations, campus leaders reflect on the data collected and engage in conversations to identify the highest leverage action step to be taken by the teacher. These action steps are then documented and followed up through lesson rehearsals or observation feedback meetings held with each teacher’s respective manager... **These instructional rounds are used to provide feedback and coaching to campus staff and have proved the greatest influence on the overall success of the students at Carver Academy.”**

This aligns with evidence that coaching can significantly improve instruction quality and student outcomes. A [meta-analysis](#) concluded that the difference in effectiveness between teachers with and without instructional coaches was similar to the difference between novice teachers and those with five to ten years of experience.



*Ysleta Elementary*



## V. CONCLUSION

*Ortiz Elementary*

Although the ties between poverty and academic outcomes are strong, they are by no means unbreakable. The 62 “spotlight schools” featured in this report illustrate the potential for academic growth and excellence within Texas’s highest poverty schools. We examined the strategies and initiatives that have driven success and identified the following four themes:

- **Data-Driven Decision-Making:** Consistent data cycles and live data are essential for monitoring TEKS mastery, tailoring interventions, and guiding professional development. Building data literacy among educators, students, and families empowers all stakeholders to set ambitious goals, monitor progress, and make adjustments when necessary.
  - ◆ Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills
- **Small Group Instruction:** Data-driven small-group instruction offers additional support to students needing targeted help, ensuring that all learners can grow and achieve mastery of state standards.
  - ◆ Accelerated Instruction and High-Impact Tutoring

- **High Quality Instructional Materials:** Evidence-based curricula and aligned professional development provide the foundation for strong core instruction.
  - ◆ Instructional Materials Review and Approval
  - ◆ Instructional Materials and Technology Allotment, SBOE-Approved Instructional Materials Allotment, and Open Education Resources Printing Allotment
- **Capacity Building:** Competitive salaries, coupled with data-driven professional development and coaching, are crucial for attracting, retaining, and supporting effective teachers.
  - ◆ Teacher Incentive Allotment

The success stories from these spotlight schools illustrate that there are common practices and school-level decisions that can drive strong student outcomes, even in challenging circumstances. Moreover, evidence-based statewide policies, when coupled with additional funding, can support schools across diverse geographies and student demographics in reaching excellence. By embracing these core principles and tailoring them to their unique contexts, schools across Texas – and the nation – can work towards fostering academic success for all students.

## APPENDIX A: LINK TO FULL TABLE OF SPOTLIGHT SCHOOLS

## APPENDIX B: SURVEY QUESTIONS

### Likert-Scale Questions

Questions asked respondents to rank choices on a 5-point scale from “not at all important” to “very important”

1. Despite facing the unique challenges of a high-poverty school navigating pandemic-era learning, your school was able to generate impressive growth and/or proficiency rates on the annual summative assessment. How important were each of the following interventions in helping your school generate such remarkable outcomes?
  - a. Summer learning programs
  - b. High impact tutoring
  - c. Accelerated learning
  - d. Mentorship programs
  - e. Family engagement
  - f. Extended school days/years
  - g. Small-group instruction
  - h. High-quality instructional materials
  - i. Innovative staffing models
2. How important were each of the following in your efforts to attract, retain, and support high-quality educators?
  - a. Competitive salaries
  - b. Grow-your-own programs
  - c. Professional development
  - d. Mentorship programs
  - e. Performance-based awards and bonuses
  - f. Professional learning communities (PLCs)/Affinity groups
3. How important were each of the following professional development topics or approaches in boosting educator effectiveness?
  - a. Classroom management techniques
  - b. Instructional strategies
  - c. Data and assessment practices
  - d. Curriculum implementation
  - e. Technology
  - f. Culturally responsive teaching
  - g. Social-emotional learning
  - h. Peer observation
4. To what extent did you implement the following programs and policies to reduce chronic absenteeism?
  - a. Early warning systems
  - b. School-based attendance teams
  - c. Family engagement
  - d. School climate improvement
  - e. Punitive truancy measures
5. To what extent did you implement the following programs and policies to support whole-child development and well-being?
  - a. Social-emotional learning (SEL)
  - b. School counseling and mental health services
  - c. Partnerships with community-based organizations to provide services such as healthcare, counseling, housing, or financial assistance
  - d. Restorative justice or conflict resolution
  - e. Positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS)



Forest Hill Elementary

### Short Answer Questions

1. What strategies or initiatives have you implemented that have driven positive student outcomes?
2. How do you use data to monitor and improve student outcomes?
3. How do you foster a positive and inclusive school culture that supports the wellbeing of students from low income backgrounds?
4. Is there anything else you'd like to share with us?