

Increasing Students' Achievement Through Instructional Effectiveness

DISTRICT PROFILE:

**Dr. Antonia Saez Elementary School
Puerto Rico**

Metro Status: Urban

Grades: K–6

Total Enrollment: 410

Hispanic: 98%

Free and Reduced-Price Lunch Program: 89%

Special Education Services: 19%

OVERARCHING GOALS

In the 2009–2010 school year, the International Center for Leadership in Education (part of Scholastic Achievement Partners) met with ASES teachers to develop an instructional focus around rigor, relevance, and relationships in order to 1) clarify expectations for teachers and students, which included defining higher standards of instruction and of student performance; and 2) improve students' motivation to learn. Through this focus on developing more effective and motivating teaching practices, the school aimed to increase the number of students performing at the Proficient and Academic Advanced Performance Levels on the Puerto Rico Test of Achievement (PPAA) in Spanish Language Arts (SLA), English as a Second Language (ESL), and mathematics.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT

During the initial needs assessment, the International Center used the following tools to identify assets and potential challenges for improving instructional effectiveness at ASES.

THE CHALLENGE

The leadership at Dr. Antonia Saez Elementary School (ASES) was seeking to dramatically raise the academic achievement of students in the school. ASES had not demonstrated adequate yearly progress (AYP) on the Puerto Rico Test of Academic Achievement for seven consecutive years, since 2003. Recognizing that changes needed to be made to curriculum and instruction to improve student achievement, ASES sought assistance from the International Center for Leadership in Education, in partnership with Educational and Professional Services Corporation (EDUPRO), to develop a comprehensive reform plan.

1. The Learning Criteria Rubric

This rubric is used to assess the degree to which a school exhibits the Learning Criteria, a set of dimensions identified by the International Center as key indicators of excellent curriculum and instruction. The Learning Criteria Rubric has four dimensions: foundation learning (achievement in core subjects), stretch learning (higher-order thinking in advanced courses), learner engagement (student motivation), and personal skill development (positive behaviors and attitudes) in students. As part of the Learning Criteria evaluation, the International Center conducted interviews, classroom observations, and analyses of school data.

2. THE WE TEACH™ INSTRUCTIONAL STAFF SURVEY

This survey was administered to teachers and other Instructional staff to assess their perceptions of student engagement, the learning environment, and school leadership.

3. THE WE TEACH™ STUDENT SURVEY

This survey was administered to students to assess their perceptions of the quality of instruction, the learning environment, and school leadership.

NEEDS ASSESSMENT FINDINGS

The needs assessment results indicated the students at ASES were receiving limited exposure to rigorous and relevant instruction that actively engaged them in higher-order thinking. Lessons at ASES tended to be traditional lectures, using teacher-centered instruction in which students copied notes from the chalkboard and answered close-ended, knowledge-based questions. According to the WE TEACH survey, teachers acknowledged that engaging students in critical thinking and problem-solving tasks was important for effective instruction. However, a comparison of WE LEARN and WE TEACH survey data indicated a high level of dissonance between perceptions by students and teachers. For example, while most teachers reported using a student-centered approach, the majority of students perceived it to be teacher-centered. These survey results also signaled that students did not perceive classroom instruction to be relevant to their lives.

Classroom observations, student interviews, and surveys indicated that the level of student engagement at ASES was inconsistent and varied widely across different classrooms. Observers noted that although students were often comfortable calling out responses during lessons, teachers asked few follow-up questions to further engage students and extend their thinking. Without consistent strategies for engaging all students and drawing out their thinking, it was difficult for teachers to assess students' conceptual understanding. Furthermore, there appeared to be a culture of low expectations for achievement among the students.

CUSTOMIZED ACTION PLAN

Based on the results of the needs assessment, the International Center worked with ASES to create a customized action plan for developing a common culture of rigor, relevance, and relationships at the school in order to boost student achievement. Specific areas of focus identified in the action plan included

- 1) improving rigor and relevance in instruction;
- 2) increasing collaboration and shared planning among teachers;
- 3) instituting strategies to increase students' motivation to succeed.

Developing Instruction Based on Rigor and Relevance and the Learning Criteria

In accordance with the action plan developed with the International Center, ASES teachers instituted a strong focus on improving rigor and relevance in instruction, and strengthening the areas emphasized in the Learning Criteria. The International Center provided training and job-embedded coaching to reinforce teachers' understanding of the Rigor/Relevance Framework and of Learning Criteria such as foundation learning and stretch learning. Using the Rigor/Relevance Framework to ensure lesson quality, teachers began building individual lesson plan for each student to target his or her areas of weakness in core subjects. A formal lesson planning tool was developed to provide a cohesive vision of activities and connect lessons to standards and objectives. To become more effective at targeting individual needs, teachers administered a learning styles inventory to their students and began collecting more frequent data on student progress. They also analyzed PPAA test results and developed rigorous lessons to specifically address areas where students show deficiencies. For example, more stretch learning was integrated into lessons by allowing students the opportunity to conduct research in the library and to use technology for writing.

Facilitating Collaboration Focused on Curriculum and Instruction

The action plan included increasing collaboration and shared planning among teachers as a critical step in improving effective teaching practices. ASES organized collaborative teacher teams by grade, and cross-planning periods were identified. In their group meetings and teacher-coordinated team workshops, teachers began sharing their learning about the Rigor and Relevance Framework and working together to build lessons consistent with the framework and Learning Criteria. The grade-level teams also collaborated to examine results of the PPAA, identify the standards and objectives that required particular attention to meet proficiency goals, and share these findings with students and families.

Increasing Student Motivation

To further support student learning and improve achievement, ASES staff began instituting strategies to increase students' motivation to succeed. For example, teachers awarded certificates to students who scored at the Proficient or Advanced levels on the PPAA. Families and the community were invited to take part in a celebration recognizing students who met AYP goals. In addition, teachers developed an activity outside of school to celebrate students' success on the PPAA.

RESULTS

Subsequent to beginning their collaboration with the International Center, ASES made remarkable progress in raising student achievement levels on the PPAA between 2009 and 2010. To provide context, the ASES results were compared with the average proficiency during the same time period at ten other schools in the same geographic area. The student

populations at the ten comparison schools were similar to ASES in socioeconomic status, percentage in Special Education, and 2009 student achievement levels.

The largest gains at ASES occurred in mathematics. The percentage of ASES students scoring at the Proficient or Advanced levels on the Mathematics PPAA more than tripled, growing from 10% in 2009 to 34% in 2010. In contrast, the average proficiency rate decreased in the comparison schools, from 25% to 20% (Graph 1). On the ESL portion of the PPAA, the percentage of ASES students scoring Proficient or above doubled, from 24% in 2009 to 46% in 2010. ASES students far outperformed the average ESL proficiency rate at the ten similar schools, which showed a drop of 5 percentage points from 24% to 19% (Graph 2). The percentage of ASES students scoring Proficient or Advanced also nearly doubled on the SLA portion of the test, from 21% in 2009 to 41% in 2010. Again, the comparison schools saw an average drop of 6 percentage points in SLA proficiency, from an average of 30% to 23% Proficient or above (Graph 3).

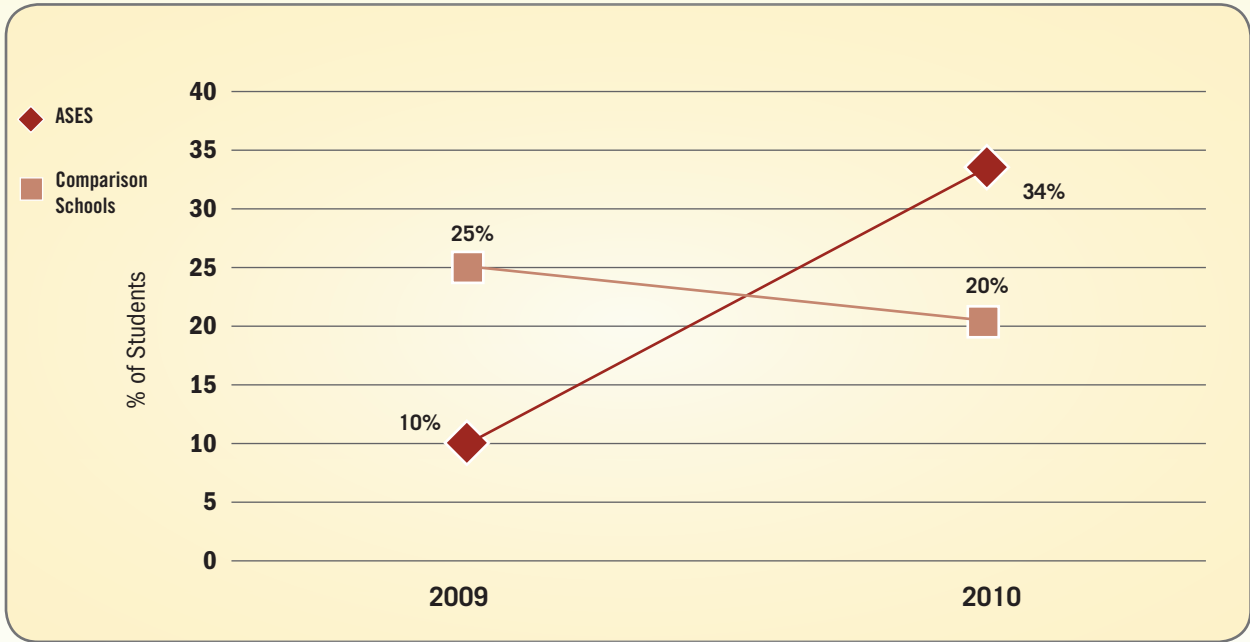
CONCLUSION

Before their partnership began with the International Center and EDUPRO, large numbers of ASES students performed at the lowest performance levels on PPAA state assessments. ASES offers a powerful example of how schools can draw on the International Center and Scholastic Achievement Partners school improvement process to ensure that all students perform at higher levels by increasing levels of rigor, relevance, and relationships in teaching and learning. With clear expectations, rigorous instruction, and improved motivation, ASES students moved from basic skill levels to proficiency and while gaining problem solving and critical thinking skills.

GRAPH 1

Dr. Antonia Saez Elementary School Students, Grades 3-6 (N = 245)

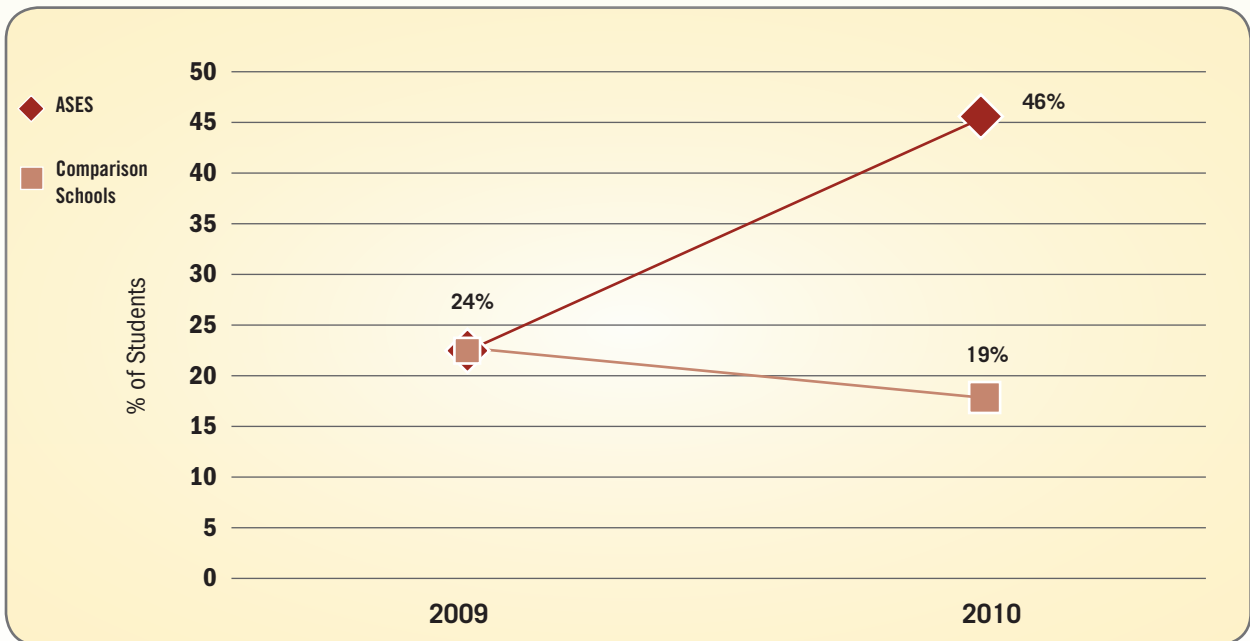
Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced on PPAA in Math, Compared to 10 Similar District Schools, 2009 and 2010



GRAPH 2

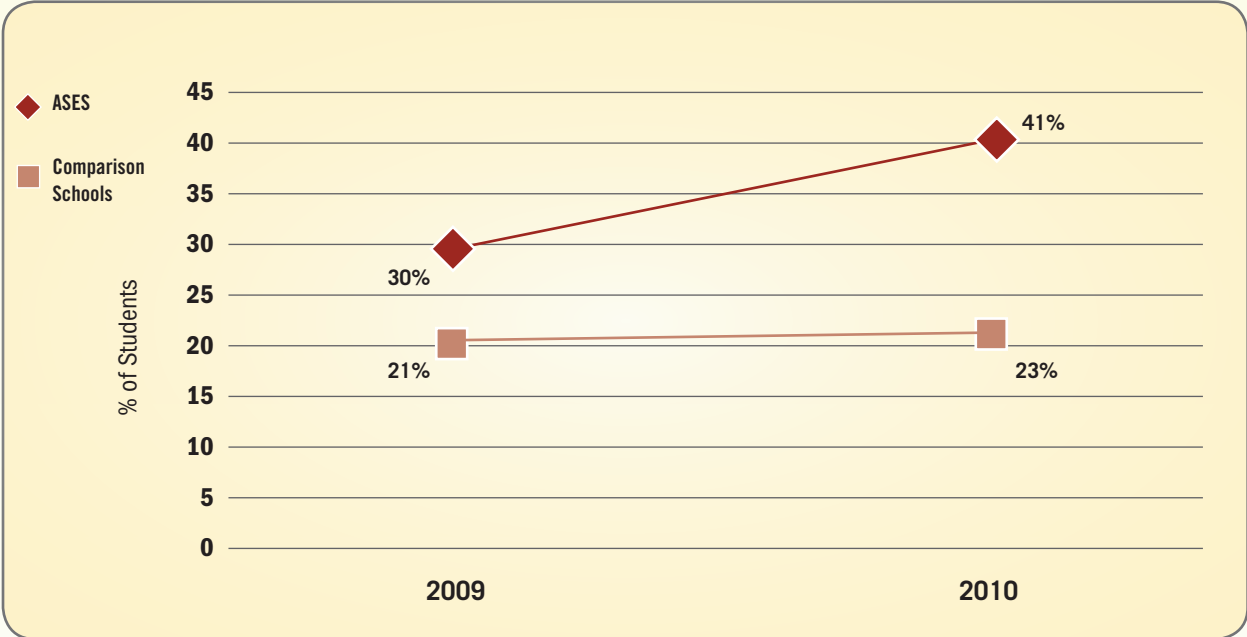
Dr. Antonia Saez Elementary School Students, Grades 3-6 (N = 245)

Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced on PPAA in ESL, Compared to 10 Similar District Schools, 2009 and 2010



GRAPH 3

Dr. Antonia Saez Elementary School Students, Grades 3-6 (N = 245)
Percentage of Students Scoring Proficient or Advanced on PPAA in SLA, Compared to 10 Similar District Schools, 2009 and 2010



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Who We Are

Scholastic Achievement Partners brings together the International Center for Leadership in Education, Math Solutions, and Scholastic Implementation Services to offer a full range of solutions for helping district and school leaders raise achievement for all students. With over 700 expert consultants and coaches around the country, we provide unmatched support in human capital development across content areas, comprehensive school improvement, and program implementation.



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