

# **Reducing Academic Disparities in the Arkansas Delta: University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff Delta Academic Initiative**

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## **Executive Summary**

### **Background:**

In 2004, the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff implemented a comprehensive plan to reduce academic disparities of youth in six Arkansas Delta schools, including: Altheimer; Dermott; DeWitt; Dollarway; Pine Bluff, and Star City. The plan was launched as the Delta Academic Initiative (DAI). Upon securing a select staff, it began work with its six targeted districts in the Delta for which its staff began developing and directing remediation efforts in their schools. The University has long been aware of the many students from those schools who begin college having to enroll in developmental courses. Indeed, UAPB has a long history of outreach efforts to assist rural, working class students, such as those who attend the targeted schools of the DAI. This plan, however, is distinct from all earlier plans in that it began as a comprehensive initiative that connected university staff and public school staff and integrated and built on the earlier, successful service and educational programs previously implemented by the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff.

### **The Initiative:**

The overall goal of the DAI was to help close the achievement gap between historically low-performing students in the Arkansas Delta region and students from other parts of the state who typically perform better on standardized tests. Additionally, it is to improve the quality of life in the Arkansas Delta by strengthening the academic performance of its youth from all socio-economic levels.

To do this, the DAI provided professional development and technical assistance to build capacity of the teaching and administrative staffs at the school and district sites. The work of the DAI, conducted by program staff at UAPB, was organized into five areas: (1) university faculty development; (2) administrator support and leadership; (3) after-school academies for students; (4) coalition of community members, parents, and educators; and (5) the teacher corp pre-service scholarship program.

The infusion of additional concepts drawn from current best practices, the inclusion of a comprehensive evaluation plan (including baseline local, state, and national measures, monthly, annual, and longitudinal outcomes), and the building of a strong university/ school/ business, and state coalition to embrace and support the project's implementation promised a longevity that would continue long after those who developed and initially monitored the initiative were able to leave it in the competent hands of the schools and its teachers.

The Delta Academic Initiative was designed to be integrated into the teacher education program and remain involved in these school districts beyond the five-year funding cycle. Funds were anticipated until June 2009. The initiative included a selected staff composed of a Director, an Assistant Director, and three staff positions representing Literacy, Reading, and Mathematics to remain through five (5) years of academic enrichment activities. The thrust of the DAI has been to implement a comprehensive plan to reduce disparities in students' academic performance in English, mathematics, and reading. In 2004, the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff and the DAI began a five-year funding cycle, with funds anticipated until June 30, 2009. The plan began with a six month planning and organizational phase followed by the initiation of enrichment services to 1<sup>st</sup>, 6<sup>th</sup>, and 9<sup>th</sup> graders in year one. Grades are being added annually, and by year five (5) all grades (1-12) will be included in the enrichment plan.

Since its inception, the DAI has provided high quality technical assistance services to districts and schools in order to build their capacity, to support processes and research-based improvement strategies, and to improve student achievement in English, math, and reading. It has provided technical assistance and support to build capacity at the school site and has created coherence among seven components of the education system: standards; curriculum; instruction; assessment and resources; policy and governance, and family and community. Through the DAI, UAPB has directly linked its work to district improvement work, the state mandates, the work of education service cooperatives, and the thrust of the DAI's collaboration with the University's Department of Education.

A comprehensive evaluation process is another critical feature of the plan. Key assessment measures include: the number of participants; mastery of English, mathematics and reading—as measured by the Benchmark examinations; the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS), the National Assessment of Educational Progress, and the ACT. Unconditional admission—and matriculation to graduation from an accredited college or technical institution are further outcome measures of the Initiative.

**Rationale/justification of Initiative:** Low performing districts and schools require intensive assistance from external service providers to improve student achievement (Daniels, 1999; Hord, 1994; Lewis, 1998; United States Department of Education [USDE], 1998; NCLB, 2002). Likewise, current Arkansas legislation (House Bill 2824) states: “Until the 2009-2010 school year, students that are identified as not meeting the satisfactory pass levels for an end-of-course assessment shall not receive credit on their transcript for the course related to the end-of-course assessment until the students are identified as having participated in remediation through an individualized academic improvement plan. Prior to the 2009-2010 school year, remediation does not require that a student must pass a subsequent end-of-course assessment in order to receive credit for a course” (p 2, lines 34-36—p 3 lines 1-8). Given these mandates it is clear that, in order for low-performing schools to improve student academic achievement, the amount of assistance needed is significant and vastly underestimated both in terms of intensity and longevity.

Typically, state departments of education, within the school improvement division, have limited time and personnel to provide the intensive assistance needed to overcome the significant challenges faced by low-performing schools to improve student achievement.

External change agents assigned to or contracted by schools generally offer short term, fragmented, and piecemeal improvement efforts that do not create structures for creating coherence, professional development, and support throughout the system to achieve substantive and sustained improvement. Furthermore, it is often assumed that those responsible for student learning (both formal leaders and teachers) already know, or can effortlessly learn and apply new strategies to improve student achievement without intensive, ongoing guidance, modeling and coaching from external change agents (NCLB, 2001)

**Project Purpose:** To increase student mastery of English, Mathematics, and Reading among historically low performing students; to solve significant problems facing educational systems and communities; to improve all students' learning; to sustain efforts to improve student achievement, specifically for those students who continue to fail to meet the state standards.

**Strategies:** The work of the DAI, conducted by program staff at the University of Arkansas, Pine Bluff (UAPB), is organized into six strategic focal areas: (1) faculty development; (2) administrator support and leadership; (3) after school academies; (4) coalition of community members, parents, and educators; (5) parent involvement; and (6) the teacher corp.

The DAI process connects and integrates the work to reduce academic disparities in the Arkansas Delta to the work already underway at the state and coop levels. High quality technical assistance is the vehicle the DAI used to build capacity. Technical assistance has been provided in the following areas:

- Professional development
- Consultations
- Information dissemination
- Convening / Facilitating events
- Research
- Summer Academies
- Teacher Institute / Professional Development
- Providing Computer Lab
- Classroom observation / Coaching
- Modeling instruction
- Lesson plan development
- Interpreting standards

These processes and research-based improvement strategies address:

- a. Information / Awareness
- b. Knowledge Building / Skill Acquisition
- c. Authentic Applications / Feedback
- d. Resource Access / Sustained Support
- e. Analyzing and linking with research / Best practices
- f. Creating a plan for action
- g. Implementation

- h. Monitoring and assessing progress
- i. Sustaining and institutionalizing change

**Activities:** (serviced grades 1, 6, 9)

**Year 1: January 2005-June 2006      Progress and Accomplishments**  
**Grades 1, 6, 9**

- The initial DAI activities occurred early in 2005. These included visits and conversations with the district administrators to identify and agree upon a plan of action to focus the improvement efforts in reading, English, and mathematics. For example, all seven districts indicated their desire for assistance with advancing teacher content knowledge and use of effective teaching strategies. All districts also indicated the need for assistance with improving parental involvement.
- The DAI staff developed plans for Phase One of the Faculty Development Component, which was a 2-day Summer Teacher Institute held June 1-2, 2005. The DAI staff designed the Teacher Summer Institute to provide participants who would be teaching in the Summer Academies an overview of the initiative and an opportunity to develop instructional plans for the academies.
- The DAI staff prepared for the implementation of the academies component with the DAI 4-week Summer Academies. The school districts recruited teachers and submitted names of students who would be invited to attend the Summer Academies held in each district. The summer academies serviced 112 students, and 38 teachers taught in them.
- Teachers used the DAI four-step process:
  1. Assessment:      Use assessments to identify students' academic deficiencies
  2. Gap Analysis:    Identify gaps in Student content Knowledge and skills
  3. Curriculum:      Develop curriculum using *Understanding by Design and Differentiated Instruction*
  4. Instruction:      Design instruction to meet the differentiated learning styles/needs of learners.

Teachers used the 4-step process for developing curriculum and instruction, differentiated to meet the individual needs of students who attended the academies.

- DAI Logic Model: This Model illustrates key components of evaluation focus areas. (See attached logic model)
- The DAI Summary of its initial Summer Academies provides an official recap of its first summer academy compiled by its external evaluation service, Southwest Education Development Laboratory (SEDL).
- Focus on degree to which DAI project activities have been carried out as planned and their effectiveness in achieving desired results.

- Placed, maintained, and secured computers purchased for use in this project and make them available for periodic inspection.

**Activities:** (Serviced grades 1 & 2; 6 & 7; 9 & 10)

**Year 2: July 2006-June 2007      Progress and Accomplishments**

**Grades: 1, 2; 6, 7; 9, 10**

- Developed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) for each school district, delineating the terms under which the University of Arkansas at Pine Bluff and the schools would work together in partnership to increase students' reading, mathematics, and English achievement.
- Developed and delivered professional development, technical support, mentoring, and coaching to professional staff which focused upon the improvement of English reading and math achievement.
- Provided technical assistance to support data collection, interpretation and use and planning for implementation of new practices considered as necessary for improvement efforts.
- Implemented After School Academies for low-performing students in the DAI's six (6) districts. The DAI presented, defined, and modeled the DAI's Four Step process for use by the teachers.
- The DAI Advisory Boards were established. Topic of discussion Project Implementation, evaluation, and recommended next steps.
- The DAI held Summer Academies in 2006.
- The DAI staff and DAI teachers attended conferences, both in-state and out-of-state, on Understanding by Design and Differentiation of Instruction.
- The After School Academies serviced 403 students and operated from September 2005 through March 2006. Thirty-eight teachers participated.
- Evaluation Site visit from external evaluators (SEDL).
- Two teacher corps scholarship recipients. One of the teacher corps scholarship recipients graduated in 2006.
- DAI Specialists Summarized Portfolios

**Activities:** (Serviced grades 1, 2, 3; 6, 7, & 8; 9, 10, & 11)

**Year 3 July 2007 to June 2008**

## **Progress and Accomplishments**

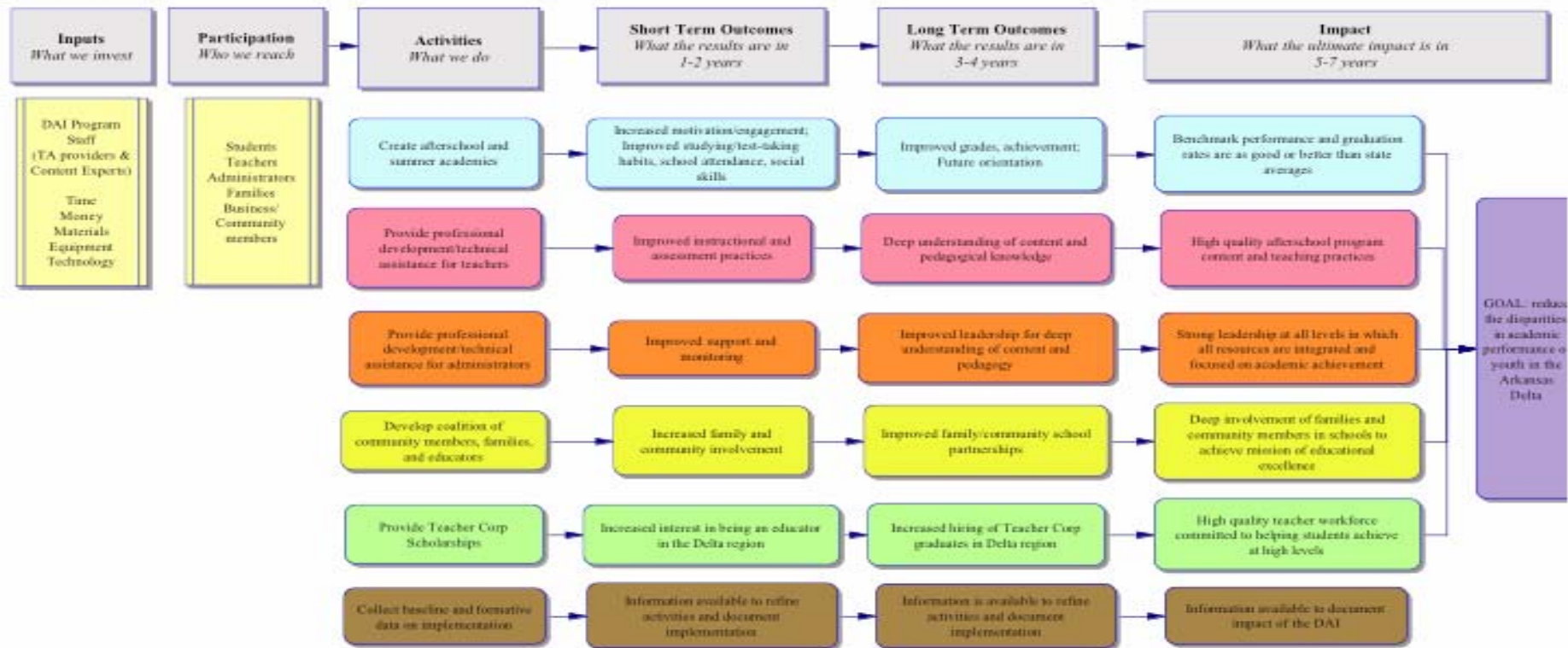
**Grades: 1, 2, 3; 6, 7, 8; & 9, 10, 11**

- Developed and delivered professional development, technical support, mentoring, and coaching to professional staff which focused upon the improvement of English, reading, and math achievement.
- Provided technical assistance to support data collection, interpretation, use and planning for implementation of new practices which are considered as necessary for improvement efforts.
- Over 90% of DAI teachers participated in Professional development activities.

## **NEXT STEPS:**

- 1. DAI will provide additional professional development for teachers and principals focused on Differentiated Instruction. Each District is expected to provide time for teachers to share strategies to differentiate instruction.**
- 2. DAI will implement a lead teacher component at each district for Math, Reading and English.**
- 3. DAI will analyze individual student achievement data.**
- 4. DAI will continue formal integration into teacher education.**

**Delta Academic Initiative Logic Model (Revised)**  
**May 24, 2006**



**Blue:** Afterschool and Summer Academies

**Pink:** Teacher Professional Development and Technical Assistance

**Yellow:** Coalition of Family and Community Members

**Orange:** Administrator Professional Development and Technical Assistance

**Green:** Teacher Corp

**Brown:** Evaluation