

## RPS: Randolph High School AIM Academy Program Evaluation Executive Summary

This Program Evaluation was conducted for the Randolph Public Schools at the request of the District's Director of Special Education and Student Services in order to examine the District's High School AIM Academy Program as part of a larger continuum of program evaluations. The overall purpose of the evaluation was to determine program effectiveness in supporting positive outcomes for students with emotional and behavioral disabilities served within this district program and to identify areas of strength and areas for improvement for the District to consider. The report, in its entirety, provides action-oriented recommendations to guide future decision-making based on the evidence acquired through the evaluation process.

Several guiding questions were developed by the evaluation Team based on conversations with District administrators and the previous evaluator to help frame the scope of this evaluation. These guiding questions included:

- 1) How is the District currently performing in regards to evidence-based practices specific to educating students with Emotional Impairments within the High School AIM Program?*
- 2) How are therapeutic supports differentiated for students who are serviced within the context of the AIM programs?*
- 3) What type of program model would support a continuum of cohesive services and supports for students with Emotional Impairments across the district in grades K-12?*

The AIM program at Randolph High School possesses a variety of strengths that the district can utilize when formulating an improvement plan. The most highlighted positive component of the program is the figurative reach of the program's Director. This role is pivotal in growing and shaping a program and the relationships that the Director has forged with both students and staff are remarkable. Collectively, the AIM team shares a passion for helping struggling students through creative, out-of-the-box strategies to keep students invested in their learning. Student attendance can often become an issue for students with significant emotional impairments or behavioral difficulties that can lead to school refusal. However, the compassionate and systematic approach to attendance relays a sense of accountability by the

students through daily student check-ins that may result in coordination with the family/home setting to bring students to school. The result of this outreach is quite simply stronger relationships with students, a hallmark of supporting students with emotional and behavioral concerns. The AIM team goes a step further to connect on different levels with their student body by hosting “pot luck” dinners throughout the year. The impact of this event is immeasurable and brings students and staff together for non-academic, personal connections. The district promotes and supports weekly meetings between the new Climate Support Specialist at TLC (Middle School) and the Director of the AIM (High school) program to improve programmatic alignment for students with significant therapeutic needs. The AIM School Adjustment Counselor brings another layer of value by expanding the professional role beyond the scope of pure clinical work and remains ever-present as a support to the AIM student body throughout the day. The district continues to offer relevant and program-specific Professional Development opportunities annually to AIM staff, such as Trauma-informed practices. Additionally, the staff within the AIM program instituted their own book study to collectively further educate themselves in program specific areas, most recently in Restorative Practices. A strong communication system has been established and maintained by the Director to ensure that ongoing updates are shared with parents in real time. And, lastly, the administration’s dedicated efforts to the betterment of the program, such as this external evaluation process, show meaningful leadership toward continuous improvement.

### **Overarching Finding #1**

#### **AIM Academy Program model alignment with Alternative Education (not Special Education)**

The design of AIM Academy and the district-wide alignment to an Alternative Education program are significant factors of the program that would necessitate the District applying for categorization as an Alternative Education school. As such, the district lacks a special education pathway for students who transition from the Middle School TLC program to the high school level and may still require a more restrictive placement with strong academic, behavioral and therapeutic special education supports and who do not fit into the “At Risk” category as defined by DESE. The District will want to use caution when transitioning special education students from TLC at the Middle School to the High School to ensure their special education needs are the primary focus with the intent to service in the Least Restrictive setting. The District should avoid having the AIM Academy attempt to be both an Alternative Education program and a sub-separate special education program for students with Emotional Impairments as it can not conform to the two varying sets of state regulations. The district will rely on DESE criteria for programming that will guide the discrimination of what student profile should enter an Alternative Education program and seek alternative pathways for students requiring therapeutic special education services. The confusion lies in the difference between how the district should approach a disability versus a disadvantage.

### **Overarching Finding #2**

#### **Lack of Curriculum and Instruction in SEL, PBIS, Transition and Life Skills**

The AIM Academy provides a strong core academic curriculum and credit recovery services for struggling learners in the areas of English Language Arts, Mathematics, History and Science. There are some initial signs of Transition skills being forged within the program, however; this is a benefit of a newly hired staff with a Transition Specialist background versus a long-term programmatic implementation plan. From a special education lens, the AIM Academy lacks comprehensive, systematic instruction and assessment in Social-Emotional Learning, Life Skills, Self-Determination, and Transition skills centered around each individual's need (through an IEP). With consideration as an Alternative Education program, AIM will also want to develop these skills but from a different perspective (a student's disadvantage). Along that same vein, the district may want to develop strong connections to community-based or work-based learning opportunities for At-Risk youth to create real life experiences they can draw upon.

Given the high number of special education students in AIM Academy, the absence of curriculum in the areas outlined above has an impact on the quality of students' IEP. There is a lack of comprehensiveness in testing and application for students identified as requiring a sub-separate, therapeutic program. The IEPs moving forward will require stronger representation of social-emotional learning, behavioral support, life skills as well as transition skills. The development of a strong life skills approach (money management, cooking, cleaning, laundry) is a necessary component of the AIM Academy curriculum for both profiles: special education students and students At-Risk. However, the distinction of why students lack the skills is imperative to "how" they are instructed and what type of support or program may be needed. Students who are not limited by their cognitive capacity or an emotional impairment but more so due to socio-economic disadvantages, cultural barriers and/or other societal disadvantages may benefit from the same curriculum but for reasons that many "At-Risk" students are facing, lack of access. Again, the confusion lies in the appropriate approach to the student profile, is it one of disadvantage or lack of opportunity or is it due to an identified disability.

### **Overarching Finding #3**

#### **Enhance Unique Learning Formats and Universal Design for Learning to improve Student Outcomes**

The DESE Alternative Education Guide defines student learning time as learning that "can happen in a variety of settings and formats" such as: Directed Study, Independent Study, Service Learning and Work-based learning. The creativity offered through an Alternative

Education program offers students a variety of options for work credit. The Team will want to coordinate this within the framework of Universal Design for Learning (UDL) to improve overall access for students. UDL targets multiple means of Engagement (why), Multiple Means of Representation (what), and Multiple Means of Action/Expression (how). As the district solidifies its alignment to an Alternative Education program, a heavier emphasis should be placed on ensuring a variety of learning formats, that consider UDL and how that can improve student engagement, are in place. Universal Design for Learning naturally presents opportunities for various learning styles and offers accommodations embedded into daily learning. For students with disabilities, UDL offers many of the prescribed accommodations found within IEPs that can support greater student engagement, improve understanding, and promote independence.

### Recommendations

Several detailed recommendations were generated based on the findings from this program evaluation that will be useful in providing the District with additional ways to further develop capacity and ensure continued high quality programming for students with substantial social, emotional and behavioral needs. Recommendations were organized into three main sections: *Recommendations for District-Level Considerations*, *Recommendations for TLC Program Model and Structure*, and *Recommendations for Curriculum and Instruction*.

The **district-level recommendations** underscore the importance of identifying the DESE-aligned pathway that AIM will align with and therefore, vertical planning for the TLC elementary and middle school programs may support the structure and model of a different pathway for students who require a therapeutic special education setting at the high school level. Additional recommendations to improve the District's Trauma-Sensitive and Culturally Sensitive practices were outlined.

Specific recommendations for the **TLC Program Model and Structure** include developing a clear vision for the TLC program across all grade levels/buildings. In the case of AIM Academy, the District would benefit from developing a clear vision for an additional program pathway at the High School for students transitioning out of the TLC middle school. As noted above, substantive differences in the TLC model were noted at the High School level, which creates substantial confusion with regards to the overarching structure and vertical alignment of a cohesive district program continuum for students with Emotional Impairments.

Within AIM, there is a limited overall emphasis on the intended "therapeutic" nature of the program. As such, it is recommended that the District create further clarity in the explicit

identification and cohesive implementation of evidence-based social-emotional and positive behavioral supports that are offered as part of the specially designed instruction of a special education program versus an Alternative Education program, although both may require therapeutic support. Of significant note, the absence of the BCBA is counter-intuitive to the design and intent of the program, which is described as supporting students with behavioral needs. A major strength of the AIM Academy is the ongoing presence of the Adjustment Counselor for frequent check-ins and to keep a pulse on students' state of regulation.

A review of current students' assessment records revealed that cognitive and academic achievement measures were consistently utilized to inform the eligibility process and development of the IEP. General measures of behavior were also prevalent in most students' records; however, assessments generally lacked the use of specific measures designed for students with potential emotional disabilities. The District should consider adopting a consistent practice across all programs in the use of specific assessment tools geared towards determining the presence of Emotional Impairment. Furthermore, despite the behavioral nature of students referred to AIM Academy, there was no evidence of Functional Behavioral Assessments conducted, to instruct the development of BIPs, in the assessment records. The assessment records also lacked testing in the areas of Transition Skills such as Independent living and Employment. The addition of Transition Assessments will be pivotal to special education students referred to AIM (or a future TLC model).

Given the potential alignment with an Alternative Education program, the district will want to ensure that IEPs are comprehensively written for students in the AIM Academy and that resources are available to support students determined eligible for AIM Academy. As the District identifies a special education pathway for students out of TLC middle school it will be imperative that each student is appropriately placed and that the level of special education supports and therapeutic services are identified and practiced. It may benefit the District to provide a professional development series on IEP development that will subsequently shape the implementation of services for students at the high school level.

In an effort to increase the effectiveness and impact of paraprofessional support, the District would benefit from creating clarity with regards to expectations for paraprofessionals that support students in the AIM Academy.

All program staff, including teachers and paraprofessionals, should maintain current certification in a crisis management program (e.g., CPI, Safety Care) at all times. The profile of students in the AIM Academy may require a finely tuned set of skills in the art of de-escalation. The District may consider adding more training and monitoring of the effectiveness of



strategies as it relates to time on learning as well as encourage staff to participate in ongoing honing of their personal de-escalation skills with a lens on cultural sensitivity.

From a special education standpoint, the District would benefit from supporting an interdisciplinary team model that encourages increased collaboration among various service providers (Special Educators, OT, SLP, BCBA, etc.) and focuses on embedding social-emotional and behavioral regulation skills across the entire day.

As mentioned in previous TLC program evaluations, the District would greatly benefit from creating a TLC Task Force to drive programmatic improvements in a systematic and cohesive manner across the entire TLC continuum from Kindergarten to 12th grade. Additionally, this task force can provide guidance and support to the AIM Academy as an Alternative Education program if needed.

Recommendations in the area of **Curriculum and Instruction** were considered first and foremost with the framework of Universal Design for Learning. The premise of all curriculum and instruction should fall under the umbrella of Universal Design for Learning with a focus on enhancing the three elements: Multiple Means of Engagement (why), Multiple Means of Representation (what), and Multiple Means of Action/Expression (how). Specifically, within the TLC program, the students' varying social-emotional needs, and academic needs impact traditional learning and teachers will want to focus on more high impact accommodations. Two areas were highlighted for the District to expand on: Social Emotional Curriculum and Instructional and Assistive Technology. Specific reference to models such as *AIM: A Behavior Analytic Curriculum for Social-Emotional Development in Children*, by Mark Dixon and Dana Paliliunas, which incorporates the research-based approaches of Mindfulness, Acceptance and Commitment Therapy, and Applied Behavior Analysis was cited. The district will want to attend to improved use of instructional and/or assistive technologies by students to support equitable access to learning based on Individualized Education Plans. Although Randolph is a one-to-one district with regard to personalized devices, safe use of devices can be a delicate balance of student need and attention versus students who may show patterns of unacceptable behavior. However, Assistive technology can be an extremely useful tool when considering student accommodations and modifications such as self-pacing of student work, ability to discreetly provide feedback, and for providing targeted personalized support (e.g., autocorrect, suggestive phrasing, research split screens, digital organizers, etc). The district is cautioned to intermittently ensure equitable access is promoted for students in AIM with regard to individual needs, accommodations, and/or modifications as well as to consider the necessary life skills of laptop use. Proficiency with online systems is a requirement in many areas and will

be needed for students who may want post-secondary education or who may enter the workforce.