

**Practices Worthy of Attention**  
**YES College Preparatory School**  
**Houston Independent School District**  
**Houston, Texas**

**Summary of the Practice.** YES College Preparatory School in Houston, Texas, is an open-enrollment public school serving students in grades 6–12 from populations that are historically underrepresented in higher education (mainly Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students). All students take four years of high school mathematics, and acceptance into a four-year college or university is required for high school graduation. The key components of YES’s operations include a thorough and extensive teacher hiring and induction process, collaborative work of teachers in building an aligned curriculum, and a built-in comprehensive student support system within the extended school day.

**Need.** Historically underrepresented students in higher education need K–12 academic support and preparation as well as invested educators who will help them prepare for college entrance and success.

**Goal.** YES’s goal is to help develop more college graduates from economically disadvantaged families than any other public school system in Houston. The ultimate goal is to create a critical mass of college-educated students who return to Houston and guide substantive change for the city’s underserved neighborhoods and communities.

## Demographics

YES College Preparatory School serves grades 6–12. Enrollment has increased over the past few years, up to more than 650 students in 2005–2006, which is a 30% increase since 2002–2003 (see Table 1).

**Table 1. YES College Preparatory School Enrollment Data**

Academic Year	Enrollment
2002–2003	505
2003–2004	584
2004–2005	646
2005–2006	658

Table 2 shows the percentage of students enrolled since 2002–2003 by race/ethnicity, limited English proficiency, and economic disadvantage. YES has a 100% graduation rate. The majority of YES students are Hispanic (over 90%) and classified as economically disadvantaged (about 74%). Compared to Houston Independent School District (HISD), YES has a higher percentage of Hispanic students (Hispanic student enrollment in HISD was 59% in 2006–2007) and just slightly fewer economically disadvantaged students (78% of students in HISD were classified as economically disadvantaged in 2006–2007). YES’s website states

that 87% of YES students in the classes of 2001–2006 are first-generation college-bound. All of YES’s students—100%—are accepted to four-year colleges or universities, and acceptance to a four-year college or university is required for high school graduation.

**Table 2. YES Enrollment Rates**

<b>Demographics</b>	<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>Percentage Enrolled</b>
<b>Asian American</b>	2002–2003	1.0
	2003–2004	1.4
	2004–2005	1.1
	2005–2006	0.8
<b>Black</b>	2002–2003	6.9
	2003–2004	4.8
	2004–2005	5
	2005–2006	3.8
<b>Hispanic</b>	2002–2003	88.9
	2003–2004	90.6
	2004–2005	92.3
	2005–2006	93.6
<b>White</b>	2002–2003	3.2
	2003–2004	3.3
	2004–2005	1.7
	2005–2006	1.8
<b>Limited English Proficient</b>	2002–2003	23.6
	2003–2004	11.8
	2004–2005	6.5
	2005–2006	0
<b>Economically Disadvantaged</b>	2002–2003	74.9
	2003–2004	72.1
	2004–2005	71.1
	2005–2006	74.3

## **Description of the Practice**

YES College Preparatory School started off as “Project YES” in fifth-grade classrooms at one school in Houston Independent School District (HISD) in 1995, when a few Teach for America teachers in an elementary school started working with project-based learning. When students from that school moved on to sixth and seventh grade, they would sometimes complain to their former fifth-grade teachers that they were not learning anything new in middle school. In response, these teachers expanded project-based learning into grades 6

through 8 to bridge the gap from elementary to high school. However, students in high school then began to complain to their middle school teachers that they were not learning, so teachers in Project YES expanded to include high school curricula as well, and then submitted for a charter to become a grades 6–12 school.

Starting in 1998, YES became a charter school serving students in grades 6–12. YES's model is based on several components, starting with student admission and teacher hiring. YES is a school of choice for teachers and students. Students at YES have chosen to be there and have a sense of purpose at school, since the faculty at YES work to build an academic culture and an expectation of college attendance and graduation for their students. This culture is new to many students who are first-generation college-bound. Admission is based on open enrollment; if there are more applicants than admission spaces, YES uses a lottery system.

YES faculty work to keep students motivated from the moment they are accepted. Teachers go to students' homes when students are accepted to meet the student and his or her family. These meetings usually last about 45 minutes; teachers welcome the student and family to YES and review the contract that parents, students, and teachers agree to and sign. The contract is a commitment to excellence and hard work. YES sees this contract as a requirement for success for all involved, so that everyone is accountable for the students' success.

YES believes that their vision of underrepresented students attending and graduating from college can be realized through the use of concrete and measurable goals, beginning with a clearly stated and measurable mission that everyone buys into. For YES, this mission is to have every single student attend and complete college. YES staff do everything they can to ensure this happens by focusing on what students need to be academically successful. Some of their measurable practices are their requirement that all students follow the college-preparatory track and that all students gain acceptance to a four-year college or university. Since 1999–2000, YES has also required all students to take a minimum of one Advanced Placement (AP) course and test or International Baccalaureate (IB) course and test prior to graduation.

### ***Teacher Support and Collaboration***

Teacher support and collaboration is a key component of YES, consisting of several pieces: the hiring process, new teacher induction, common planning time, and a comprehensive set of materials for feedback and evaluation of teachers. There is a strong level of teacher support, where the role of each staff member is clearly delineated, and mentors, instructional coaches, department heads, and administrators all provide a different level of feedback and support to help teachers improve their practice, thus improving student performance and learning.

### **Hiring Process**

YES administration realized early on that teachers can make or break the vision and goals of the school, and they wanted to hire staff who would work effectively toward the school's mission. One way YES identifies the teachers they want is through a personality profile they administer as a behavioral interview to potential applicants. YES has identified seven traits or characteristics they look for in teachers. Some of these characteristics include rebound time,

or how fast a teacher responds to adversity or challenges (they look for teachers who can rebound quickly); personal and career drive, which is how goal-oriented the applicant is (they look for teachers who are highly goal-oriented); reserve, or level of how outspoken an applicant is (they look for teachers with low reserve, as they want teachers to vocalize their opinions so they can continue to improve); and tendency to agreement (they want teachers who will engage in debates and challenge new ideas). YES has found a way to use this behavioral interview, in addition to observing sample lessons the applicants teach, to select the best-fit teachers for their school.

### **Teacher Induction**

Since YES's educational model has higher goals than many public schools, administration felt it was important to have new faculty learn about the culture and mission of the school. They also felt it was very important to support teachers in their first two years to ensure they have what they need to teach effectively and to promote the academic rigor required of their students. In the two months before starting the academic year, new teachers learn about the school's classroom culture and the expectations for instructional planning and delivery. They are mentored by an experienced faculty member on communicating with parents and planning for the beginning of the school year (setting up the classroom, writing the syllabus, planning the first week of instruction and assessment). During their first year, new teachers meet monthly to attend workshops by instructional coaches on instructional planning and delivery, assessment, and working with special populations. They also are involved in regular, structured meetings with their mentors for lesson planning, looking at assessments and student achievement, and talking about classroom culture. Coaches and mentors also observe lessons to provide feedback to the new teachers on increasing their effectiveness through the use of YES's formal teacher feedback and evaluation system. Their second year of teaching includes working with their mentor and being involved in observations and feedback, but not as often as in year 1.

### **Teacher Feedback and Evaluation System**

YES has a teacher feedback and evaluation system to ensure that teachers have the information they need to improve their own practice and thus improve student learning. This system supports teachers with goal setting and reflection as a part of the teacher's growth, providing feedback to improve teacher practices throughout the school year, as part of their ongoing professional development. At the beginning of the year, teachers set goals for the year, using the teacher summative rubric as a guide. This rubric consists of four main domains: classroom management and culture, instructional planning and delivery, YES responsibilities, and YES values.

Each domain has 5–15 indicators that define the domain, so observers can rate teachers on each indicator during their observations to come up with a composite domain rating. The four rating levels are unsatisfactory, approaching proficiency, proficiency, and mastery. YES's goal is to have all teachers attain a "proficiency" level for each indicator and for the composite domain score for all four domains. The purpose of this detailed rubric is to identify the indicators where teachers need the most help and support, and to customize mentoring and coaching in the feedback to help improve teacher pedagogy. Throughout the year, teachers receive feedback from their peers, from supervisors, and from students, and they attend conferences and workshops to help them achieve their professional development goals. At the

end of the school year, the teacher summative rubric is used to evaluate the teacher's performance, along with their course material, progress on professional development goals, self-reflections, self-evaluations, evaluations by administration, student performance, and student feedback.

### **Curriculum and Curricular Planning**

YES staff continue to work and plan together to integrate and align the education of their students across the grades 6–12 span. Teachers work together in writing common assessments and lesson plans for vertical teaming within the mathematics department, to ensure students are building their understanding across strands at each grade. At the inception of YES was an early commitment to an ambitious curriculum. The first two summers were spent writing curricula and looking at well-known, strong college-preparatory schools to decide what courses to teach and what topics should be covered in each course. As in many college-preparatory tracks, students complete the state-required curriculum earlier than the state requires. Students begin taking courses for high school credit in eighth grade, and upon graduating from YES, they have completed four years of mathematics, English, social studies, and science, and at least three years of a foreign language.

In 2006–2007, the curricular focus was on the objectives measured on common assessments in the school. In addition, there was standardization across grades for how teachers use common assessments to measure and improve academic accountability, which was reinforced with peer mentoring and feedback, as well as workshops throughout the year. The curriculum at YES is not based on textbooks; rather, many resources are used to integrate multiple ways students learn (e.g., videos, manipulatives). All lesson plans are fully written out for teachers, as that helps provide unity in curriculum and planning and helps teachers explain to students why and how the lessons are applicable to mathematics and why the ideas are important to know.

The spirit of YES is to continue to try out new, promising practices that can improve the quality of teaching and learning. By piloting different practices and testing their impact, YES faculty learn about how they can best improve student learning; they realize that they can always improve, and they continually look for better ways of serving their students. For instance, measuring student learning has had an effect on the mathematics curriculum track students are now on at YES. Students now take Algebra I in eighth grade so they can be on track for Calculus their senior year. In eighth grade, students are taking some courses usually reserved for high school students. At YES, students complete three years of middle school curricula in sixth and seventh grade. Since all students must be accepted into a four-year college or university as part of the high school graduation requirement, all students are college-bound and thus are enrolled in college-preparatory courses that will prepare them for college-level courses.

### ***Student Support***

Strong student support is a key component for students' success at YES. This begins with the teachers' commitment to their students' success. Students are involved in extended school days five days per week; time is spent within each school day working on study skills;

students receive tutorials and additional support based on their individualized support plan; college counseling is built into the curriculum; and summer school is required

### **Teacher Belief and Influence**

Since YES focuses on students usually underserved by large public schools (ethnic minorities, English language learners, and students who are economically disadvantaged), many students enter YES unprepared for the rigorous curriculum, sometimes a year or two behind grade level. This is a challenge for any school, and YES has been working on ways to bring students up to speed or even accelerate them ahead of their peers in large public schools. When asked how teachers are supporting students, especially those coming in below grade level, YES administration said, “It’s not rocket science in the pedagogical approach.” Teachers have cell phones so that students can call them for help with homework instead of getting frustrated and feeling like giving up. Basically, YES says that both teachers and students must engage in hard work to meet the academic expectations.

### **Extended Day**

The school day at YES is longer than most public schools, 7:40 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. The long day provides teachers and students with the additional time and opportunity to work together to meet the high expectations of the school. The longer hours include tutorials and study halls that provide extra academic support time for students. Also, co-curricular activities like clubs or sports are included in the school day, usually at the end of the day. To include some of these extra activities and provide additional support for students, YES’s school day can run until 6:30 p.m. YES finds co-curricular activities important, as do most colleges, so they provide teacher-led clubs that focus on both academic and nonacademic activities (e.g., origami, martial arts, knitting). The availability of nonacademic clubs is based on the extracurricular talents of YES faculty.

### **Study Skills, Tutorials, and Individualized Support Plans**

Classes on study skills and life skills are built into the school day to help reinforce the culture and expectations of students on a college-preparatory track. Tutorials and study hall periods are also built into the school day, as additional time for students to receive help with different ideas and concepts and to work on homework. In the early grades, there are focused pullouts in mathematics for students needing extra help. These are self-paced classes that depend on the needs of the students. The pullout classes have at most 25 students, and most of the time students work on mathematics at their own pace. Teachers work with students needing additional help, devising individualized support plans and providing a concrete process to help struggling students get back on track.

### **College Counseling**

YES has a sophisticated college counseling program that students participate in when they enter tenth grade. YES faculty advise student groups of 12–15 students over three years. Since 87% of YES students are first-generation college-bound, the college counselors act as “surrogate” parents to advise students on the steps for successfully applying and being accepted to a four-year college or university. In the junior year, these groups meet twice per week. In the fall semester of the senior year, the groups meet daily and walk through the college application process, looking at scholarships and other funding opportunities. In the

spring semester of the senior year, students learn about managing their finances and preparing for the move away from their parents and future independence. College counselors also offer workshops to help educate parents about college admissions, financial aid, and the other aspects of the application process.

### **Summer School**

Summer school is required for every rising sixth- through ninth-grade student at YES. Summer school runs for three weeks, from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. each day. The focus of summer school differs for each grade. In the summer before the sixth-grade year, students learn about the organization and workload of YES and the culture in which they will begin working on their academic careers. Some academics are involved, but mainly the summer school for incoming sixth-graders is focused on the new culture of YES. In summers before seventh and eighth grades, summer school is more focused on academics; students have opportunities to take intersession classes as well as remediation classes, if needed. In the summer before ninth grade, summer school is a combination of activities done in the previous summers for sixth, seventh, and eighth grade, except students are focusing on the high school component—learning about expectations, workload, and the culture of high school.

### **Results**

YES measures their growth based on college admission, school ranking, and student test scores. When this report was written, there had been five graduating classes at YES, and 100% of those students had matriculated to a four-year college or university, including Brown University, Columbia University, Cornell University, Georgetown University, Stanford University, Texas A&M University, University of Pennsylvania, University of Texas at Austin, and Yale University. YES graduates have received over \$10 million in scholarships and financial aid. In addition, according to YES's website, 90% of YES alumni are still enrolled in college, which is higher than the national college retention average for economically disadvantaged students (22%) and for all ethnic groups (50%). *Newsweek* provides an annual list of the top 1% of all public schools in the U.S., and YES was included in this list in 2006. YES has also been rated by the Texas Education Agency as “exemplary” or “recognized” since its operation.

Table 3 lists the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) results for the past few years for YES in mathematics by Hispanic and economic disadvantage classifications. The other subgroup categories have not been included because the low number of students in each of those categories does not provide enough data to show here. The TAKS was first administered in the 2002–2003 school year. The mathematics portion of TAKS measures how well students in grades 3–11 have mastered the statewide curriculum in mathematics. Satisfactory performance on the TAKS at grade 11 is a state requirement for high school graduation. As seen in Table 3, there is variability in performance across grade levels, most likely due to the standards being phased in by the Texas Education Agency. Now that the standards are set, future performance data should be more consistent. In general, YES has a very high percentage of students passing the mathematics TAKS, with an average of more than 90% passing at each grade level across subgroups and years.

**Table 3. YES College Preparatory School Mathematics  
Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills Results**

Demographics	Academic Year	TAKS (Percentage Met/Exceeded Standard)					
		6	7	8	9	10	11
All Students	2002–2003	93	93	97	92	90	94
	2003–2004	91	86	89	81	85	97
	2004–2005	94	92	83	95	83	98
	2005–2006	95	98	95	95	87	100
Hispanic	2002–2003	94	92	97	91	90	93
	2003–2004	91	86	89	84	84	97
	2004–2005	94	91	85	95	84	98
	2005–2006	96	98	95	96	85	100
Economically Disadvantaged	2002–2003	92	92	96	92	90	96
	2003–2004	91	85	87	80	84	96
	2004–2005	92	93	84	97	86	100
	2005–2006	99	99	94	96	83	100

Compare the performance of YES students (Table 3) with HISD in Table 4. YES students are far outperforming their Houston counterparts, even though YES's demographic makeup represents a historically underperforming population of students. For example, in ninth grade, more than twice as many YES students than HISD students are passing the mathematics TAKS.

**Table 4. Houston Independent School District Mathematics  
Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) Results**

Academic Year	TAKS Math (Percentage Met/Exceeded Standard)					
	6	7	8	9	10	11
2002–2003	54	47	50	38	48	62
2003–2004	62	58	57	45	51	80
2004–2005	56	48	48	45	44	60
2005–2006	65	59	59	45	51	71

As seen in Table 5, overall SAT scores for YES students exceed those of students in HISD by as much as 217 and as little as 42 points. A full 100% of YES seniors take the SAT, while only 30% of students in Houston ISD take it (WestEd, 2006).

**Table 5. SAT Results for YES College Preparatory School and Houston Independent School District**

<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>YES SAT Combined Score</b>	<b>HISD SAT Combined Score</b>
2001–2002	1156	939
2002–2003	1016	937
2003–2004	1034	942
2004–2005	976	934
2005–2006	1025	*

Note: The asterisk (\*) notes that data were not available.

Students at YES are encouraged to take Advanced Placement exams. Between 70% and 90% of YES students take at least one AP exam. Since 2001–2002, YES has tracked the number of students taking and passing AP exams (with a minimum score of 3). This percentage passing has varied between 58% and 74% (see Table 6). YES ranks in the top 10 public schools in Texas for students taking and passing AP exams.

**Table 6. YES College Preparatory School Advanced Placement Exam Results**

<b>Academic Year</b>	<b>Number Enrolled</b>	<b>Percentage Taking AP Exam</b>	<b>Percentage Passing AP Exam</b>
2001–2002	50	90	74
2002–2003	65	71	65
2003–2004	115	70	58
2004–2005	125	87	59
2005–2006	123	80	60

## Conclusions

YES College Preparatory School has franchised three other YES-brand schools in Houston ISD. The vision of having all students matriculate to college is well supported by the infrastructure of extensive teacher support and collaboration as well as student support. At YES, both teachers and students are monitored on their progress to ensure that they all have what they need to be successful. Teachers are dedicated to consistently working together to ensure they are meeting a minimum standard for providing quality teaching to their students. Students participate in extended school days, tutorials, and extra work to accelerate their learning and skills to be prepared for college preparation, working with teachers to ensure their own success. YES results show that underrepresented students are achieving higher than their HISD peers, as seen in test scores as well as graduation and college admission rates. Since YES has a higher representation of underserved students than HISD as a whole and yet still has 100% of its students matriculate to four-year colleges and universities, it appears that the YES model can be a possible solution for providing successful academic preparation for historically underrepresented students.

## References

WestEd. (2006). Charter high schools closing the achievement gap: Innovations in education. Report prepared for the U.S. Department of Education Office of Innovation and Improvement. Retrieved September 26, 2006, from <http://www.ed.gov/admins/comm/choice/charterhs/index.html>.

### **About *Practices Worthy of Attention: Local Innovations in Strengthening Secondary Mathematics***

*Practices Worthy of Attention* is a joint initiative of Achieve, Inc. ([www.achieve.org](http://www.achieve.org)), and the Charles A. Dana Center at The University of Texas at Austin ([www.utdanacenter.org](http://www.utdanacenter.org)). The initiative is led by Pamela L. Paek, a research associate at the Dana Center, who, in 2006, examined 22 program, school, and district practices that showed promise—based on early evidence and observation—of strengthening secondary mathematics teaching and learning.

Our goal was to document practitioners' descriptions of *what is really happening* in the field to strengthen secondary mathematics education around the country. Thus, while the practice highlighted may be common, the specific structures and strategies used to implement the practice are worthy of attention. These initial investigations set out to mark these practices for future rigorous scientific inquiry by Dana Center and other researchers.

Ultimately, we hope to create a community of inquiry made up of university researchers working with administrators and teachers from featured schools and districts to more rigorously research how effectively these practices improve secondary mathematics learning for all students.

**Reports and practice profiles.** An executive summary details the methods for this initiative and analyzes themes. Two cross-case analyses discuss specific strategies for raising student achievement and building teacher capacity. Brief profiles describe each practice. All of these publications are available on our website at [www.utdanacenter.org](http://www.utdanacenter.org).

**Data.** In all cases, data about the practice were provided by the program, school, or district studied as part of a description of their practice. We did not independently analyze data gathered through a consistent assessment tool, and we did not evaluate their uses of data for measuring effectiveness. Thus, the data in the practice profiles are intended not to prove the practice's effectiveness from a research perspective, but to paint a detailed picture of the practice and what data were used by the program, school, or district to gauge how well it was working.

**Theoretical frameworks.** In some cases, district staff mentioned specific literature on theory or practice that they used when they developed the practice we highlight. In those cases, we cite that literature in our discussion of the practice.

### **How to cite this profile**

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