



Schools Targeting Alternative Reform On-Site (STAROn)  
Evaluation

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Schools Targeting Alternative Reform On-Site (STAROn)  
Executive Summary

The Schools Targeting Alternative Reform On-Site (STAROn) was an initiative developed by the Clark County School District (CCSD) Instructional Unit. Schools created an in-house alternative to schools dedicated for student misbehavior. Principals argued that the benefits of alternative high schools were lost when students returned to a comprehensive high school. A pilot program was established among three CCSD high schools. The CCSD Research Department was tasked with evaluating the STAROn Program. Surveys were administered to three groups of stakeholders, high school teachers, students assigned to a STAROn Program, and the parents of those students assigned to a STAROn Program. In addition, student outcome measures were examined. Survey respondents reported that:

Parents strongly support the STAROn Program

- 84% believed child received needed help
- 77% reported students learned needed content and skills
- 95% of parents preferred STAROn to an alternative school

Teachers reported students who graduate from STAROn had

- Better attendance
- Better attention
- Higher academic achievement

Students associated their participation in STAROn with

- greater involvement in school activities,
- stronger sense of acceptance at school,
- stronger relationships with peers,
- perceiving themselves as better students,
- better interactions with peers and teachers, and
- better decision making.

Students who participated in the STAROn Program had higher grade point averages and earned more credits for graduation one year later than students who attended alternative high schools. Fewer students who attended the STAROn Program were expelled than those who attended the alternative high schools. In addition, students associated with the STAROn Program had significantly fewer unexcused absences than students who attended an alternative high school.

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The Clark County School District Instructional Unit was tasked with exploring a pilot program addressing student retention at comprehensive high school sites for students who violated school code, but were not necessarily expellable offenses. District staff developed a program that provided an in-house choice to attending an alternative high school. The immediate goal of the in-house program was to maintain consistency in enrollment and course of study.. The long term goal of the STAROn was to provide support that promotes graduation. Concerned principals offered four reasons justifying the need for an in-house alternative.

- First, students should remain at their school. Students need to maintain a sense of place and acquire a sense of belonging. Keeping students in their zoned schools would prevent specific staff from attempting to push difficult students onto another site, or as one principal described this practice, “recycling students.”
- Second, educators should prevent breaks in learning. There have been fewer seats available at the alternative schools with the rapid increases in student population and associated increase in disciplinary referrals. Students lose academic ground while waiting for an opening at an alternative school. In addition, students taking specific electives or advanced coursework could not be served at the alternative site. Once they’ve completed time at that alternative site, that student may not be able to make up content missed.
- Third, when students returned from alternative placement they had learned new behaviors that were more disruptive to the students’ education than before.
- Fourth, one minor reason mentioned was to avoid the appearance that challenging students are pushed out of the school to improve AYP scores.

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In discussions, school staff identified several needed aspects for the STAROn Program required. Character education was identified as necessary concurrent with the content instruction. Strong character education needed to focus on decision-making, making appropriate choices, and setting academic goals. The opportunity for students to utilize critical thinking was also identified as a need for these students.

As the program was promoted 14 high schools and one middle school were approached. Three high schools expressed interest, beginning the program in the second half of the 2009/2010 academic year. The Instructional Unit provided financial support for one instructional aide and seven prep buy-outs per school.

In the third year (2010/2011) the Instructional Unit approached the Research Department about collaborating in an evaluation of the STAROn Program. An evaluation plan was established as the funding cycle was ending. The goal of the evaluation was to inform the grantees and CCSD administration of how successful the STAROn Program was at meeting the goals. Site administrators were also identified as stakeholders and audience.

### **Method**

#### **Participants**

The total sample of STAROn students was 250 students. Sixty-seven percent were male (167). The identities of two students were not identified. Most participating students were in tenth grade (39.5%) or ninth grade (34.7%). For eleventh and twelfth grade students the percentages were much smaller, 13.7% and 11.7% respectively. STAROn participants were predominantly African American (40.4%) and Hispanic (39.6%). Asian students made up 14.0% and White students made up 2.0%. A substantial percentage of STAROn participants had an IEP (23.4%). Legacy High School had the highest number enrolled with 42.3% of the STAROn

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participants. Valley High School had the second highest with 39.2%, while Mojave High School had 18% of the total number of participants. Mojave High School enrolled less than one-half the students that Legacy High School and Valley High School enrolled in the STAROn Programs.

To allow for comparisons, archival data for 227 high school students were randomly sampled from two alternative high schools. The two alternative schools were selected by recommendation of a central administrator who supervises the alternative high schools. Students would have likely attended these two schools if the STAROn Program was not an option. The demographics were comparable to the STAROn participants, 72.2% were male, most students were in ninth grade (40.5%) or tenth grade (37.0%) with fewer eleventh grade (17.6%) and twelfth grade (4.9%) students enrolled. Students enrolled in the alternative high schools were predominantly Hispanic (48.9%) and African American (38.3%), followed by Asian (11.0%) and White students (1.3%). A substantial percentage of the alternative high school students had an IEP (21.6%).

Archived student data was collected for students who participated in the STAROn Program and the alternative high schools. Demographic and outcome data was collected from district databases. Student data selected for analysis included GPA, number of credits earned, attendance, and discipline referrals. Data was retrieved for three academic years, 2008/2009, 2009/2010, 2010/2011. Outcome data examined included attendance, discipline, credits earned, and grade point average.

Discussions occurred between the evaluator local and central site administrators including principals and deans. Teachers and support staff were interviewed on site. Four students from all three sites were also briefly interviewed. Students were selected by those deans who supervised the STAROn Program at that site.

## **Instruments**

Three surveys (student, parent, and teacher) were developed and administered. The goal of the surveys was to document perceptions of the program by the various stakeholders.

**Student Survey.** The student survey contained questions that reflected student perceptions of the STAROn Program. Questions covered topics related to relationships with teachers and other students; perceived gains in achievement, social, and behavioral skills; and personal goals. Some questions were evaluative in that students identified strong and weak points of the program.

Seventy students from three high schools, Legacy High School (38 students), Mojave High School (14 students), and Valley High School (17 students) completed an online survey. This is a potential response rate of 46.3%. There were a potential sample of 149, but not every STAROn participant may have been available to the high school staff collecting this data. Most respondents were in tenth grade (37.7%) or eleventh grade (36.2%) with some twelfth grade (14.5%) and ninth grade (11.6%) students. Two-thirds of student respondents were male. Most students (59.4%) had completed the STAROn Program with 40.6% still enrolled in the STAROn Program. Of those who were no longer enrolled 90.2% reported graduating successfully from the program; 9.8% reported they did not graduate from the program.

**Teacher Survey.** The teacher survey contained questions that reflected teacher perceptions of the STAROn Program. Questions covered topics related to familiarity with the program; formal and informal communication related to the program; perceived gains in student achievement, and social and behavioral schools. Teachers were asked questions that were evaluative identifying strong and weak points of the program.

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The teacher survey was administered online to 356 teachers from all three high schools. Of those, 142 responded, a response rate of 40.0%. The highest percentage of responders came from Mojave High School teachers with 47.8%, from Valley High School teachers 43.4% responded, and 17.2% of Legacy High School teachers. The largest percentage of teachers who completed the survey came from Valley High School with 46.1%, followed by Mojave High School with 35.2%. Legacy High School had the fewest participants with 18.8% of the total number.

Most teachers (55.5%) at the three high schools had earned a Master's degree. Only 17.2% had earned only a Bachelor's degree. The remaining 27.3% had earned a second Master's degree, and Ed.D. or Ph.D. Many of the teacher respondents had acquired extensive teaching experience with 48.5% teaching more than ten years. Another 28.1% have taught between six and ten years. Only 23.4% had five years of teaching experience or less. The average (mean) number of years teaching at their current school was 5.2 years.

**Parent Survey.** The parent survey contained questions that reflected parent perceptions of the STAROn Program. Questions covered topics related to knowledge of the STAROn Program, perceptions of the program, perceived gains in achievement, social, and behavioral schools.

School staff contacted parents by phone and asked several questions about the StarOn Program. The survey was available in English and Spanish. School staff read the questions over the phone to the parents and recorded responses in an online format. Three parents responded to the Spanish version (2.1%).

The potential sample was 149 households with high school staff successfully contacting 86 parents. Similar to the student survey, 38% of parents had students currently enrolled in

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STAROn, and the remaining had children who had exited the program. Legacy High School had the highest representation with 44.3% of the parents who participated. Valley High School had 31.6% and Mojave High School had 24.1%.

## Results

### Student Survey

Students were invited to complete an online survey about the STAROn Program. Students currently enrolled or previously enrolled were asked to participate. Currently enrolled students were given a different set of questions than those who had exited the program. The largest difference being the two sets of questions were that many of the questions were framed in the present tense instead of past tense. Additionally, currently enrolled students were asked how many weeks they had completed in the STAROn Program.

Those students who graduated from the STAROn Program reported greater involvement in school activities (63.5%) than those who were currently enrolled in the program (32.2%). Those who graduated from the STAROn Program were more likely to feel accepted at the school (91.9) than those who reported exiting the program without graduating (75.0%).

Those students who exited the program without graduating expressed positive attitudes about the STAROn Program and the STAROn personnel. Every student reported feeling understood by the personnel in the STAROn Program, being treated with respect, and trusting the teachers. When asked about the school as a whole the percentages dropped from 100.0% to 75.0% (feeling understood by all school personnel at the school and being treated with respect). Across the board, school personnel in the STAROn Program were rated more positively compared to school personnel school wide. The STAROn personnel were seen as being more respectful than school wide personnel. For students currently enrolled in the STAROn Program,

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those who did not rate teachers and staff in the STAROn Program positively were enrolled in the first five weeks of the nine-week program. No students who had been enrolled more than five weeks rated the STAROn Program personnel negatively.

Table 1

Student perceptions of assistance available and received in the STAROn Program

Item	Currently enrolled	Previously enrolled	Total
Received help needed	23 (82.2%)	28 (68.3%)	51 (72.9%)
Had the materials	16 (57.1%)	21 (52.5%)	37 (52.9%)
Close to other students	22 (81.5%)	32 (80.0%)	54 (77.1%)

Three-fourths of the students who exited the program reported being helped by the school counselors in the STAROn Program. However, only 31.7% rated community support positively, specifically, the community outreach police officers. Six students from Legacy High School reported they would have preferred attending an alternative school.

Students who exited the STAROn Program reported establishing strong relationships with their peers. They also reported that they become better students and learned social skills interacting better with their peers and teachers. They also reported making better decisions because they attended the STAROn Program.

From student interviews two issues were identified: general education teachers receiving completed course work from the STAROn classroom, and crowding. Some students reported that work completed was not received by their general education teachers. The student survey confirmed this was a consistent problem. Students from all three schools reported completed homework was not received. This is a particular problem for student in electives that are difficult to staff in the STAROn classroom. Forty-five percent of respondents claimed they lacked access

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to materials. While this includes software and tools beyond homework, it supports students' assertion.

Moving completed student work to teachers as an issue was confirmed in the Teacher Survey. Seventeen percent of teachers reported rarely receiving the STAROn students' work. Another 54.9% reported receiving STAROn students' work seldom or often. More teachers were reporting not receiving student work consistently than those who reported receiving students' work. This data suggests those involved in administering STAROn Programs may need to find new routes of moving completed course work to the correct teacher.

While crowding was brought up, students in general did not think the STAROn classes were crowded. We may infer from this that students feel like they are receiving the assistance they need and that they are getting sufficient attention from the teachers to succeed. Looking at individual schools, there was one school that differed from the other two. At that school 39% of students claimed that the STAROn classroom was crowded. This school does admit more students to their STAROn classroom than the other two schools. This policy at this school may need to be revisited.

### **Teacher Survey**

Most teachers were familiar with the STAROn Program with 39.0% admitting to a formal introduction to the program. Of the responding teachers, 82.4% reported having had a student enrolled in STAROn. Another 61.7% reported that those students graduated from the program. Further, 20.5% reported having worked in the STAROn classroom and 14.2% have mentored a STAROn graduate. Almost one-half of surveyed teachers (46.1%) reported collaborating with the STAROn leaders in supporting the program.

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Responding teachers reported improvement in students who returned to their classrooms after completing the STAROn Program. Most teachers reported students who graduated from STAROn had better attendance (83.3%), better attention (77.2%), and higher academic achievement (66.0%). Perspectives were mixed about the positive outcomes associated with the STAROn Program extending school wide. Most teachers (61.3%) did not see STAROn as having a deterrent effect. These teachers reported the number of Deans' referrals has not decreased since the program has been implemented at these schools.

**Parent Survey.** A number of parents have educated themselves about the STAROn Program with 31.1% having met the STAROn teachers and 21.9% have visited the STAROn classrooms. Perhaps contradictory, most parents were unaware that their child had exited the program, 70.2% believed their child had not successfully completed the program, while 8.5% recognized they did not know.

Parents were supportive with 84.0% believing their child was receiving the help they needed with 49.3% strongly or moderately agreeing. When asked if their child was learning the skills and content needed, 77.0% agreed, with 46.0% strongly or moderately agreeing. When asked if STAROn was preferable to having their child attend an alternative school, 94.7% agreed with 58.7% strongly agreeing. When asked about the STAROn teachers, 84.7% of parents believed the STAROn teachers worked with their child, 51.4% strongly or moderately agreed. Most parents (82.2%) agreed that the STAROn teachers understood their child, with 43.8% strongly or moderately agreeing.

When asked about gains their child had made, parents stayed positive. Most parents (68.9%) believed their child's grades improved because of the STAROn Program, 37.8% strongly or moderately agreed their child made significant progress. Eighty percent of parents

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reported their child was getting into less trouble since they had exited the STAROn Program.

When asked about peer relationships, 83.0% of parents reported that their child had better peer interactions with other students because of the STAROn Program. About the same percentage of parents (84.4%) believed their child was more respectful of teachers. More than half of the parents surveyed (51.1%) reported the STAROn Program improved the likelihood that their child would graduate from high school, 35.6% of parents strongly agreed.

**STAROn Data.** Overall, 78% of all participants graduated from STAROn. The highest percentage of graduates came from Legacy High School (86.6%) and Mojave High School(83.7%). Valley High School graduated 65.1% of the participants in the program. The second year, 2010, graduated the highest percentage with 82.6%; however, complete data was not available for 2011 which at the time data was collected was 80% of all participants. In 2009, 69.6% of participants graduated. Slightly more students with IEP's graduated from STAROn (82.0%) than general education students (76.6%),  $\chi^2 = .65$ , n.s. More eleventh grade students graduated from STAROn (90.0%) than students from the other three grades (see Table 2),  $\chi^2 = 3.63$ , n.s. Asians had the highest graduation rate of the STAROn Program (87.1%) followed by African American (79.8%), Hispanics (77.5%), and Caucasian (60.0%) students.

Table 2

Percent graduated from the STAROn Program across three years

Grade	Number	Percent graduate
Ninth	58	33.7%
Tenth	66	38.4%
Eleventh	27	15.7%
Twelfth	20	11.6%
Total	172	100.0%

\*total percentage does not reflect 100% because of rounding error

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The current status of STAROn graduates included 59.3% of graduates still attending high school. Twenty-two percent have withdrawn from the district, 10.2% have graduated from high school. Almost seven percent (6.8%) are currently expelled and 3.4% have been classified as dropping out.

Those students who were enrolled in STAROn but did not graduate from this program had different outcomes. Most students withdrew from CCSD (77.6%), 18.4% are currently expelled and two percent are enrolled in Adult Education.

To make comparisons, 227 students from two alternative high schools were randomly selected. Two alternative schools were selected as the most likely placements for STAROn students had they not participated in the STAROn Program. The demographics were similar in terms of ethnicity, grade, and special education designation. Students were selected across three years to represent the three years of the STAROn Program. Three outcomes were examined: student achievement, attendance, and disciplinary actions.

Table 3

Number of credits earned according to participation in program

Time Frame	STAROn	Alternative High School
Prior to enrollment	6.6	5.3
At exit	8.5	7.2
One year later	11.2	9.8
<i>Mean gains made</i>	4.6	4.5

Two measures of student achievement were analyzed, number of credits earned and grade point average. Student achievement was measured across three time points, prior to admittance to the STAROn or alternative program, immediately after exiting the respective program, and one year later. Students from the alternative high schools were matched by year enrolled.

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Students enrolled the third year were not included. There were no statistically significant differences ( $\lambda = .99$ ,  $F = .67$ , n.s.) across the three time points, except at enrollment; STAROn participants have significantly greater credits prior to enrolling in the STAROn Program.

Analysis of individual time points had STAROn participants with significantly higher credits at enrollment and at exit, but not at one year later. There were more than 100 students scores not available one year later.

Examining GPA found significant difference between programs over the three time points as can be seen in Table 3,  $\lambda = .95$ ,  $F_{(2, 248)} = 7.04$ ,  $p = .001$ ,  $\omega^2 = .05$ . STAROn students began with higher GPA's and maintained a higher GPA throughout the time frame. STAROn students made the greatest growth during the STAROn Program, while those attending alternative high schools growth in GPA occurred after they returned to the assigned comprehensive high school.

Table 4

Grade point average for students enrolled in the STAROn Program compared to those enrolled in an alternative high school

Time Frame	STAROn	Alternative High School
Prior to enrollment	1.37	1.05
After enrollment	1.50	1.05
One year later	1.46	1.30
<i>Mean gains made</i>	0.23	0.25

Participants in STAROn had fewer unexcused absences, but this was not statistically significant over the three time points,  $\lambda = .99$ ,  $F = .69$ , n.s. On average, students from both programs exceeded ten absences. There were few students available for this longitudinal analysis. Had fewer students dropped out or withdrawn, the results of this analysis may have

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been more reliable. There was little difference in the number of excused absences between the two groups.

Disciplinary data was only collected at the end of two years, so a smaller data set was examined. An ANCOVA was conducted to assess differences between the two groups. Students attending an alternative high school were more often expelled a second time,  $F_{(1, 93)} = 6.74$ ,  $p = .01$ ,  $\omega^2 = .07$ . Students from both programs were suspended at an equal rate,  $F_{(1, 93)} = 1.34$ , n.s. On average, STAROn and alternative high school participants would be suspended one more time after participating in either program. There was no difference in the number of required parent conferences between participants of either program,  $F_{(1, 93)} = 1.41$ , n.s. Participants from both programs had, on average, one required parent conference after completing their respective programs.

Table 5

Cumulative unexcused absences according to participation in program

	STAROn	Alternative High School
Prior to enrollment	5.9	7.6
After enrollment	9.0	10.5
One year later	12.3	16.1

## Discussion

This evaluation identified perceptions and outcomes in relationship to participating in the STAROn Program as it was implemented at three high schools for the last two and one-half years. The results were very positive. All participating stakeholders surveyed believed students benefited from participating in the STAROn Program. All three groups of stakeholders associated STAROn graduates with better achievement, improved peer and teacher relations, and

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better social skills. Teachers reported better attendance and attention in class. Students additionally reported greater involvement in school activities.

From the interviews, students reported developing a stronger support network in the school. They developed new supportive relationships with teacher, counselors, deans, and peers. Deans confirmed that students who graduated from STAROn sought deans and teachers for support and to strengthen relationships.

In comparison to students at the alternative high schools, students associated with the STAROn Program had higher GPA's and earned more credits, but they also started out ahead on the academic outcomes prior to entry into their respective programs. STAROn graduates had fewer unexcused absences, confirming what was reported by the high school teachers. Students attending the alternative high schools were more likely to be expelled a second time than those assigned to the STAROn Program. While most of the differences were not statistically significant, this data suggests there may be fundamental differences between those students who would be assigned to STAROn Programs and those who attend alternative high schools. This parallels reports by principals that students who attend alternative high schools then return to the comprehensive high school with greater behavioral problems before attending the alternative high schools.

One interesting trend was identified from the comparative data analysis. STAROn students made their academic gains while enrolled in the program. Students from the alternative high schools made their academic gains after they have left the alternative high school. A similar pattern occurs with attendance. The difference may be that most of the STAROn staff use attendance as an incentive, either early release for good attendance or extended participation in the program for poor attendance. This pattern ought to be investigated more closely.

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One of the limitations of this study was that the evaluation was completed at the end of the funding cycle. Outcomes were based on existing available data. Had this evaluation been planned with the development of the program, more sensitive instruments would have been developed to more accurately gauge progress.

### **Recommendations**

The positive results suggest strong support from school personnel and parents alike. This can be interpreted as support for continuing the STAROn Program. Principal and parents support was strong enough that it may be appropriate for this program to expand into other comprehensive high schools.

There was sufficient variation between the three pilot high schools that the best practices be collected and standardized across all sites. The implementation of outside resources appears to be a factor. The pilot schools collaborated with Metro police officers to work with STAROn students; however, students did not perceive that aspect as a positive experience. The use of high school counselors appears to be an important component. Student input from the surveys and interviews suggest this should be a central aspect of the STAROn Program. One pilot school had developed a curriculum for the counselor to present once a week. Students learned skills important in succeeding in the employment and school environments when working with the school counselor.

At the same time, communication and sharing between sites might facilitate stronger programs at individual high schools. Almost all negative comments came from one site. One reason may be that this site admitted more students at one time in the STAROn classroom than the other two sites. Students at this school reported feeling crowded at this STAROn Program.

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One recommendation may be that the number of students admitted remains small. The other two sites kept their respective STAROn classrooms under 20 students.

Communication within schools regarding the STAROn Program may also need to be improved. While most teachers were directly involved with STAROn because of a student being admitted to the program, they expressed little sense of what was occurring in the STAROn classroom. Much of what they knew may have occurred through informal conversations. In addition, few teachers were receiving student work completed in the STAROn classroom across all three sites.

### **Conclusion**

While much of the data collected did not have strong support for the STAROn Program over the alternative high schools, the data was supportive of the STAROn as an option for disciplinary action. Perceptions of parents, students, and school personnel are much more favorable to the STAROn option than the alternative high schools. Like many programs in the introductory stage, some revising is required. Better communication within and between sites is suggested. A better means of returning completed student work to teachers is also recommended.