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# Assessment of Alief ISD Resource Center Relocation

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Submitted for:



Submitted by:

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# Executive Summary

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Over the course of our consulting engagement with West Houston Association and Alief ISD, several positive aspects emerged. The one-on-one interviews with SMEs and other key contacts provided valuable insights into critical issues such as staffing, transportation, access, operating hours and compensation structures. The proposed solution was to turn the abandoned county library into a central family resource center.

The Director of the FACE program of Alief ISD was highly in favor of this move. In our interview with her, it was evident that she firmly believed in this vision, however, given the issues of Alief's demographics like access to transportation and fragmented ethnic groups, this vision seemed difficult to execute as a centralized location would be harder for families without cars to access and might be unable to sufficiently account for the needs of such an ethnically diverse population. In addition, given the size of the Alief population, even if accessibility was not a pressing concern, one single center would not be able to reasonably accommodate the entire population's needs and would quickly be overwhelmed.

To address these challenges, it is recommended to consolidate the current system of resource centers. To do this, we identified clusters of centers that we recommended reducing to one center with the aim of reducing the strain on financial and personnel resources. We also suggest working in conjunction with the Alief YMCA and implementing a more well connected bus system to address transportation issues.

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# Introduction and Background

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## Current Situation:

The Alief Independent School District is based in southwest Houston, Texas and contains over 40 schools, educating more than 40,000 students. Looking closer at the numbers, over half of the schools are preschool and elementary schools. An overwhelming majority of students identify as minorities, coming from Hispanic, African American, and Asian backgrounds. In addition to the student makeup containing a great number of minorities, over 60% of students are considered to be economically disadvantaged. Acknowledging the economic disparities in the area, Alief ISD has been set on providing its students as well as families with opportunities to develop their skills in resume writing, technology access, etc. through family resources accessible at each campus. The Alief ISD Family & Community Engagement department offers services that support the core of the family. In order to accommodate the variety of backgrounds, they offer their services in English, Spanish, and Vietnamese. Alief ISD's goal is to dismantle the current system they have in place of having a family resource center at each location, and instead, utilize an unused former library building as the new centralized resource center.

## Identified Problems:

The school district is pitching the centralized location for a family resource center as a “one-stop shop,” so that families can all come together at the one location. The district experiences severe staffing problems, despite its limited hours. The current family centers are open three days a week (Tuesday, Wednesday, and Thursday). Each facility contains one person on the job, and sometimes requires someone to juggle their time between locations. They also have a high turnover rate and frequently have open positions that they are unable to fill. The existing compensation structure presents further problems. Due to the compensation, most employees applying have high school diplomas and only keep their positions for brief periods before moving on to other avenues of employment. Additionally, due to their lack of technical expertise and background in social work, training has been prohibitively challenging,

Alief ISD believes that with one central facility, there will be less staffing shortages and the facility will stay open for longer hours. It would allow for larger scale events, community unity, open opportunities for the school district to do more with the resource center, and more.

## **Objective:**

The purpose of this project is to figure out whether or not it makes sense for Alief to take over the no longer in use library. If the library were to be repurposed, then would the school district's problems be solved? In order to determine whether or not the state of affairs in Alief would change with a new location, the team evaluated the current pitfalls of the Alief system, spoke to knowledgeable sources about Alief ISD, researched other after school models and family resource centers, and considered possible alternatives to a centralized locations.

# Findings and Analysis

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In order to gain insight into the state of Alief’s family resource centers, the group set out to interview two knowledgeable figures: Shanceler Terry, the Director of Family and Community Engagement for Alief ISD, and Snejana Nihtianova, the Director of Research Operations for the Texas Policy Lab. Both interviewees possess extensive knowledge of Alief, as Terry works within the district and Nihtianova has conducted thorough research on their system.

## **Interview #1:**

The first interview conducted was with Shanceler Terry, which took place towards the beginning of the process in February. As previously mentioned, Terry holds the position of Director of Family and Community Engagement at Alief ISD. With nearly 30 years of experience within the school system, she began her career as a teacher. Over the past 13 years, she transitioned into the role of director and has witnessed the system undergo highs and lows, particularly during the onset of COVID-19. Her primary objective is to foster resilient students by strengthening family bonds. The programs offered by the family resource centers cover various essential skills, including English language proficiency, resume writing, computer literacy, and nutritional education. Terry outlined that these centers operate on a four-pillar program: ‘welcome, informed, engaged, equipped.’ They are open three days a week for 5 hours a day.

In terms of employment, many of the workers, known as family liaisons, are hired at entry level with a starting salary of \$25,000. A significant portion of these employees lack formal degrees and are unfamiliar with social work practices, often possessing limited education. Due to the nature of the job being entry level and the constrained salary, many liaisons tend to stay for three years or less to acquire experience before moving on to other positions. Presently, there are approximately 10 vacancies, and over the past decade, nearly 80 family liaisons have departed. Regarding training, the family liaisons convene once a month for training sessions. However, Shanceler Terry faces challenges in facilitating collaboration across different campuses due to limited resources. Ideally, a centralized location would enable employees to perform at their fullest potential.

## **Interview #2:**

To gain a deeper understanding of Alief ISD’s after-school programs, we interviewed Snejana Nihtianova. In the past, Texas Policy Lab collaborated with Alief ISD on the Lena Start Program,

which aimed to establish training sessions for parents, focusing on the significance of engaging in frequent conversations with their children to stimulate brain development. Experts from Rice University provided training to Alief liaisons, equipping them with background knowledge, presentation skills, and necessary training materials.

During the interview with Nihtianova, two critical areas for improvement within Alief ISD became apparent: staffing and public relations (PR) and logistics. Primarily, Alief has predominantly recruited liaisons with only a high school diploma, largely due to financial constraints. This limitation in educational background has posed challenges for program experts in training them on content related to brain development, human biology, or psychology. Furthermore, the lack of foundational knowledge has hindered their ability to effectively engage with parents and address their inquiries during sessions. For instance difficulties were observed in liaisons' interactions with parents, particularly in engaging with those who arrived late to sessions and in promptly addressing their inquiries.

In addition, the inefficiency of training became evident during periods of high staff turnover. Following one year of training and implementing the LENA Start Program, only three out of the initial seven liaisons remained within the Alief staff. This turnover rate posed significant challenges as program experts lacked the resources to retrain the incoming liaisons from scratch, while the remaining liaisons were deemed insufficiently qualified for the task at hand.

All the aforementioned issues were exacerbated to some extent by Alief's limited funding. There were inadequate financial incentives or any alternative motivating factors for the staff to commit and overcome the initial shortcomings. Program experts indeed attempted to address this by experimenting with paying bonuses to liaisons for increasing participation in sessions, which resulted in improved performance, although quantifiable results were challenging to obtain. Secondly, Alief ISD faced challenges with their PR efforts and logistics. Experts involved in the LENA Start Program observed that Alief Alief had not effectively targeted their advertising efforts towards the appropriate group of parents. Simultaneously, the program schedule was frequently interrupted, partly due to conflicts with school schedules, as all centers were located inside schools.

## **Similar Programs**

When considering how to enrich the Alief ISD system for the future, examining similar school districts with after-school programs could prove beneficial in reshaping the Alief system. Pasadena ISD, for instance, has developed its community resource center to bolster student and family community engagement. Through the assistance of Texas ACE Program, they target

services to students most in need and extend outreach to students most at risk of juvenile, homelessness, or foster care. Notably, their school website features a comprehensive community resource guide, serving as a directory of essential contacts for various purposes such as counseling, mental health resources, and support groups. Unlike Alief, where ESL classes are held at on-site locations, Pasadena ISD utilizes other venues like Peace Lutheran Church for these classes. Collaborating with local churches or popular community hubs such as the Alief YMCA is a viable alternative to engaging residents in the Alief area, offering an alternative approach to using a family resource center at every school campus.

The other organization that was researched was ExpandedED. ExpandedED is active across the New York City boroughs, and operates by building partnerships between schools and community organizations to provide students with a well-rounded education. Although New York City is different from Texas and ExpandedED is more focused on students, the benefit of investigating ExpandedED was to see how they handle creating after school programs. Their ultimate goal is to build a stronger system by creating more opportunities for young people to learn, experience enrichment activities, and connect them with communities. They go by four core elements: more time for balanced learning, school-community partnerships, engaging and personalized instruction, sustainable cost model \$1,600 per student. For each school that they help, they assess district readiness and learn from after school programs and community-school partnerships. After this, they partner with strong community organizations and use resources to educate the whole child while involving families in the process and including ongoing feedback to sustain the progress.

Both Pasadena ISD and ExpandedED are great examples that Alief ISD can learn from in order to improve their family resource centers and after school programs outside of adopting a new center. With Pasadena's successful community outreach approach and ExpandedED's focus on developing the student while involving the family, Alief ISD could develop a more solid program and improve their after school and family resource programs.



# Recommendations & Next Steps

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After a thorough analysis of the Alief Independent School District (ISD) Family Resource Centers, it is evident that significant changes are needed to address the current challenges and enhance service delivery to students and the community. The recognized issues, such as staffing shortages, restricted training opportunities, ineffective program implementation, and accessibility barriers, demand a strategic and transformative approach to guarantee ongoing success in delivering vital services.

## Proposed Course of Action:

1. **Resource Centers:** Close approximately one-third of the current 43 locations and consolidate services into strategically located centralized resource centers (assess population size of schools, closing down those with smaller student bodies). This approach will optimize resources since there would be less stress on staffing and allow for better coordination and collaboration among staff.
2. **Staffing:** Focus on hiring experienced, knowledgeable, and degreed professionals for key positions such as family liaisons. Offering incentives can help attract and retain talent, leading to improved program outcomes and customer satisfaction.
3. **Training and Development:** Implement a comprehensive training program for staff members, including soft skills development, cultural competency training, and program-specific training. Regular workshops, seminars, and skill-building sessions should be conducted by the Director of Family and Community engagement to ensure staff are well-equipped to meet the diverse needs of the community (funds not directed towards other centers should be used for workshops/training sessions).
4. **Transportation:** Introduce a transportation system to ensure all students have access to nearby resource centers, especially those not located within their schools. Collaborate with local transportation authorities or implement shuttle services to bridge accessibility gaps and promote inclusivity.
5. **Enhanced PR and Logistics:** Improve public relations efforts to effectively communicate the benefits and services offered by the centralized resource centers to the community. Develop targeted advertising campaigns, engage with community leaders, and leverage social media platforms to increase visibility and participation.

## **Methodology for Implementing Solutions:**

1. **Planning:** Develop a comprehensive implementation plan based on identified issues and stakeholder feedback. Prioritize solutions such as centralizing resource centers, improving staffing quality, enhancing training programs, and implementing transportation services for accessibility.
2. **Training:** Invest in training for staff members, focusing on soft skills development, cultural competency, and program-specific training. Collaborate with educational institutions and organizations to provide certifications and professional development opportunities.
3. **Pilot Programs:** Implement pilot programs for new initiatives such as fewer resource centers and transportation services in select locations. Monitor pilot outcomes, gather feedback from participants, and iterate on solutions based on lessons learned.
4. **Monitoring & Evaluation:** Establish a monitoring and evaluation framework to assess the impact of implemented solutions. Regularly review performance indicators, solicit feedback from stakeholders, and make data-driven adjustments as needed to optimize outcomes.

When considering how to enrich the Alief ISD system for the future, examining similar school districts with after-school programs could prove beneficial in reshaping the Alief system. Pasadena ISD, for instance, has developed its community resource center to bolster student and family community engagement. Through the assistance of Texas ACE Program, they target services to students most in need and extend outreach to students most at risk of juvey, homelessness, or foster care. Notably, their school website features a comprehensive community resource guide, serving as a directory of essential contacts for various purposes such as counseling, mental health resources, and support groups. Unlike Alief, where ESL classes are held at on-site locations, Pasadena ISD utilizes other venues like Peace Lutheran Church for these classes. Collaborating with local churches or popular community hubs such as the Alief YMCA is a viable alternative to engaging residents in the Alief area, offering an alternative approach to using a family resource center at every school campus.

## **Future Steps:**

1. **Implementation Planning:** Develop detailed implementation plans for each proposed solution, outlining key activities, responsible parties, timelines, and resource requirements. Engage stakeholders in the planning process to ensure alignment and commitment.

2. **Stakeholder Engagement:** Continuously engage with stakeholders, including staff, students, families, community members, and partner organizations, to solicit feedback, address concerns, and foster collaboration.
3. **Communication:** Develop a comprehensive communication strategy to keep stakeholders informed and engaged throughout the implementation process. Utilize meetings, newsletters, websites, and social media, to share progress updates, success stories, and upcoming initiatives.
4. **Performance Monitoring:** Establish mechanisms for monitoring and evaluating the performance of implemented solutions against key performance indicators (KPIs). Regularly review progress, identify areas for improvement, and make data-driven decisions to optimize outcomes.

## **Long Term Vision:**

1. **Growth:** Over the next 5-10 years, Alief ISD should aim to become a model district in family and community engagement, known for its innovative and effective resource center model. The long-term vision includes expanding services, enhancing partnerships, and reaching more diverse communities within the district.
2. **Impact:** Long term centralization of resource centers and improvements in staffing, training, and accessibility should create a sustainable impact on student success and community well-being. Alief ISD envisions measurable improvements in academic performance, career readiness, and overall family resilience.
3. **Collaboration:** Foster a collaborative ecosystem where families, schools, community organizations, and businesses work together to support student learning and development. Strengthen partnerships with local groups, non-profits, and employers to provide comprehensive services and opportunities for families.
4. **Continuous Improvement:** Commit to a culture of continuous improvement by regularly assessing program effectiveness, gathering feedback from stakeholders, and adapting strategies to evolving needs and challenges. Invest in research and data analysis to inform decision-making and drive innovation in family engagement practices.
5. **Equity & Inclusion:** Prioritize equity and inclusion in all aspects of program implementation, ensuring that resources and opportunities are accessible and culturally responsive to diverse student and family backgrounds. Promote diversity, equity, and inclusion training for staff and stakeholders to create a welcoming and inclusive environment.

6. Community Empowerment: Empower families and community members to actively participate in decision-making and leadership roles within the district. Provide training, resources, and platforms for community engagement, empowering families to become partners in their children's education and well-being.

The proposed recommendations and methodologies outlined above aim to address the organizational challenges faced by Alief ISD Family Resource Centers and pave the way for improved center efficiency, staff effectiveness, and community engagement. By strategically implementing these solutions and fostering a culture of continuous improvement and collaboration, Alief ISD can achieve its goal of providing equitable access to essential resources and support for its diverse student population and families.

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