

Ready Now Yuma

ASSESSING CHANGES IN COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE
AND STUDENT OUTCOMES FROM A FIVE-YEAR
COMPREHENSIVE SCHOOL REFORM INITIATIVE



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ABOUT HELIOS EDUCATION FOUNDATION

Helios Education Foundation is dedicated to creating opportunities for individuals in Arizona and Florida to achieve a postsecondary education. Our work is driven by our four fundamental beliefs in Community, Equity, Investment, and Partnership, and we invest in initiatives across the full education continuum.

Through our Florida Regional Student Success Initiative, Helios is helping underserved, minority, and first-generation students from the state's large population centers in Miami, Orlando, and Tampa achieve a postsecondary education.

In Arizona, where Latino students comprise the largest percentage of the K–12 public school population, the Foundation is implementing its Arizona Latino Student Success initiative focused on preparing all students — especially students in high-poverty, underserved Latino communities — for success.

Dear Colleague:

With the increasing demands on the 21st-century workforce, all students should graduate from high school prepared for college and career success. However, improving the skills students need is a major challenge across the country and Arizona is no exception.

In 2011, Helios Education Foundation began to talk about developing a comprehensive, high-school reform initiative focused on ensuring all students in a particular district were prepared for success in college and career. Through this work, a partnership with Yuma Union High School District was formed and, in 2012, an initiative called Ready Now Yuma was born. This initiative provides students with a rigorous, high expectations curriculum within a college-going environment. The end goal is to increase the number of students entering and succeeding in postsecondary education.

The following brief provides an overview of Ready Now Yuma including both successes and challenges. We have learned a tremendous amount in the last five years and hope that this document will help policymakers, philanthropic organizations, school districts and community leaders continue to explore ways to challenge, support and prepare students for success in college and career.

Sincerely,



Vince Roig
Founding Chairman
Helios Education Foundation

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Vince Roig".



Paul J. Luna
President & CEO
Helios Education Foundation

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Paul J. Luna".





INTRODUCTION

In today's quickly evolving, technology-driven world, it is imperative that U.S. students graduate from high school prepared to succeed in college and career. Providing students with the skills to be ready for college and career is not only vital for their personal success but also secures the economic future of Arizona and the United States. However, ensuring students are equipped with the actual skills required for success continues to be a major challenge in the United States.

According to the most recent release of the *National Assessment of Educational Progress* report, (NAEP) only 37% of our nation's 12th graders score proficient or higher in reading, while only 25% do so in mathematics (National Center for Education Statistics, 2015). Similarly, the most recent report from American Collegiate Testing (ACT; 2017) showed that 33% of the class of 2017 failed to meet the benchmarks in any of the core subject areas (English, math, reading, and science). Considering the importance of academic readiness for success in college and career, a critical question must be answered: How can our communities better prepare students for successful lives after high school?

To begin to answer this question, Helios Education Foundation (Helios) selected community partners in the state of Arizona to implement a new comprehensive high school reform initiative. Beginning in 2010, Helios awarded the Center for the Future of Arizona (CFA) a \$450,000 grant to: (a) identify a district to demonstrate an equitable whole-school reform model and (b) collaborate with Helios and the chosen district to develop an innovative, comprehensive, and sustainable initiative to prepare all students for college and career. Ultimately, CFA and Helios pursued a community partnership with the Yuma Union High School District (YUHSD), located in a small city in Arizona on the border of California and Mexico. Guided by the strategic plan created in partnership with CFA, Helios awarded YUHSD a total of \$6,040,000 to implement the initiative, entitled Ready Now Yuma, over the course of five years. Funds within that amount were also earmarked for evaluation of implementation and overall impact.

The Ready Now Yuma initiative was comprised of two primary objectives: 1) create a college-going culture in Yuma, Arizona, and 2) prepare all students for college and career. The goal of this brief, which is divided into five sections, is to analyze the extent to which Ready Now Yuma successfully met these objectives. In the first section, we

describe the Ready Now Yuma initiative and its core components. In the second section, data collected from external evaluators are used to determine how successful YUHSD was at creating a college-going culture.¹ Third, we examine influences on student outcomes and student achievement. In this section it is important to note that we looked beyond standardized test results and also measured changes in course passage rates, grade point averages (GPAs), and college going-rates, for example. Fourth, we examine key challenges to implementation and how Yuma is addressing those moving forward. Finally, our fifth section lays out our overall conclusion and recommendations for educational leaders and policymakers.

We advise the reader that this document is not intended to analyze every aspect of Ready Now Yuma. Instead, this document along with its precursor, *Preparing Students for College and Careers: Early Findings From the Implementation of Ready Now Yuma*, are meant to synthesize key findings to provide educational leaders, policymakers, legislators, and community partners with the knowledge necessary to equitably improve college and career readiness.

It is our hope that this brief will act as a call to action among education leaders, legislators, and the public to ensure that every student, regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status, is prepared for postsecondary education. We hope that these leaders will take the recommendations outlined in this brief to improve opportunities for all students in Arizona.

¹Ready Now Yuma implementation and impact evaluation was led by American Institutes for Research and Massell Education Consulting. The Morrison Institute for Public Policy led evaluation work on culture change and public perceptions.



THE INITIATIVE

What were the components of Ready Now Yuma?

YUHSD and Helios designed the Ready Now Yuma initiative to ensure that every student be given the chance to graduate with the academic skills necessary for success in college or career. The first step in accomplishing this

goal was selecting four foundational components to act as a guide for this task: rigorous curriculum, highly trained teachers, student supports, and multiple pathways to graduation.



RIGOROUS CURRICULUM

A rigorous, high-expectations curriculum, Cambridge International General Certificate of Secondary Education (IGCSE), was selected to be implemented in YUHSD. Under this curriculum, students in Yuma typically took a series of courses in their freshman and sophomore years that included content related to English, mathematics, science, and social studies (see Figure 2 for course sequence). Each of those courses included a detailed syllabus, pacing guide, and learning standards. IGCSE courses also included an optional end-of-course exam that measured the extent to which students met the standards for the course. District leaders in Yuma chose not to make end-of-course examinations a requirement for all students. Rather, students could decide if they wanted to take them.

HIGHLY TRAINED AND SUPPORTED TEACHERS

Knowing that a rigorous, high-expectations curriculum would require highly trained teachers, YUHSD created a specific set of resources and trainings to better prepare and support teachers. This included: (a) professional development from Cambridge International around implementation and best practices for instruction; (b) district-led training and professional development planning by departments; (c) embedded instructional and data coaches in each school; (d) weekly professional learning community time (PLCs) that allowed teachers to share best practices, reflect on student work, and plan instruction; and (e) a robust data system that allowed teachers to examine and reflect on student learning.

ACADEMIC STUDENT SUPPORTS

To support students who were struggling with the curriculum, YUHSD implemented a multi-tiered system of academic supports. Tier one offered all students the chance to attend opt-in after school tutoring (meaning students decided to attend). Furthermore, the district implemented “reteach and retake policies” aimed at giving failing students additional opportunities to master the coursework. Tier two offered more individualized support. At the individual level, the district began introducing early differentiated instruction strategies for teachers to use with students, allowing teachers to ensure that students were receiving instruction based on their needs. Finally, for those students falling far behind, YUHSD created a district-wide credit-recovery program aimed at keeping students on track to graduate.

MULTIPLE PATHWAYS

While the primary goal of the Ready Now Yuma initiative was to prepare every student for college and career, the district felt it was important to provide students with opportunities to pursue a variety of educational and professional pathways. This was accomplished by offering students several options: career and technical education (CTE) pathways, dual enrollment, Advanced Placement (AP), and Cambridge A and AS courses (upper-level courses). Students could choose one or more of the pathways to pursue. For example, a high proportion of students took AP coursework and CTE courses.

FIGURE 2

Yuma Union High School District Curriculum Under Ready Now Yuma		
Freshman Cambridge IGCSE Core Courses	Sophomore Cambridge IGCSE Core Courses	Junior/Senior Courses
English First Language Mathematics World History Biology or Chemistry	English Literature Mathematics U.S. History Biology, Chemistry, or Cambridge AS Environmental Science	Cambridge A/AS Advanced Placement Career and Technical Education Dual Enrollment

Students could also take AP and CTE courses in 9th and 10th grades in addition to the core curriculum.

FIGURE 3

Key Timeline Points of Ready Now Yuma Inception and Implementation

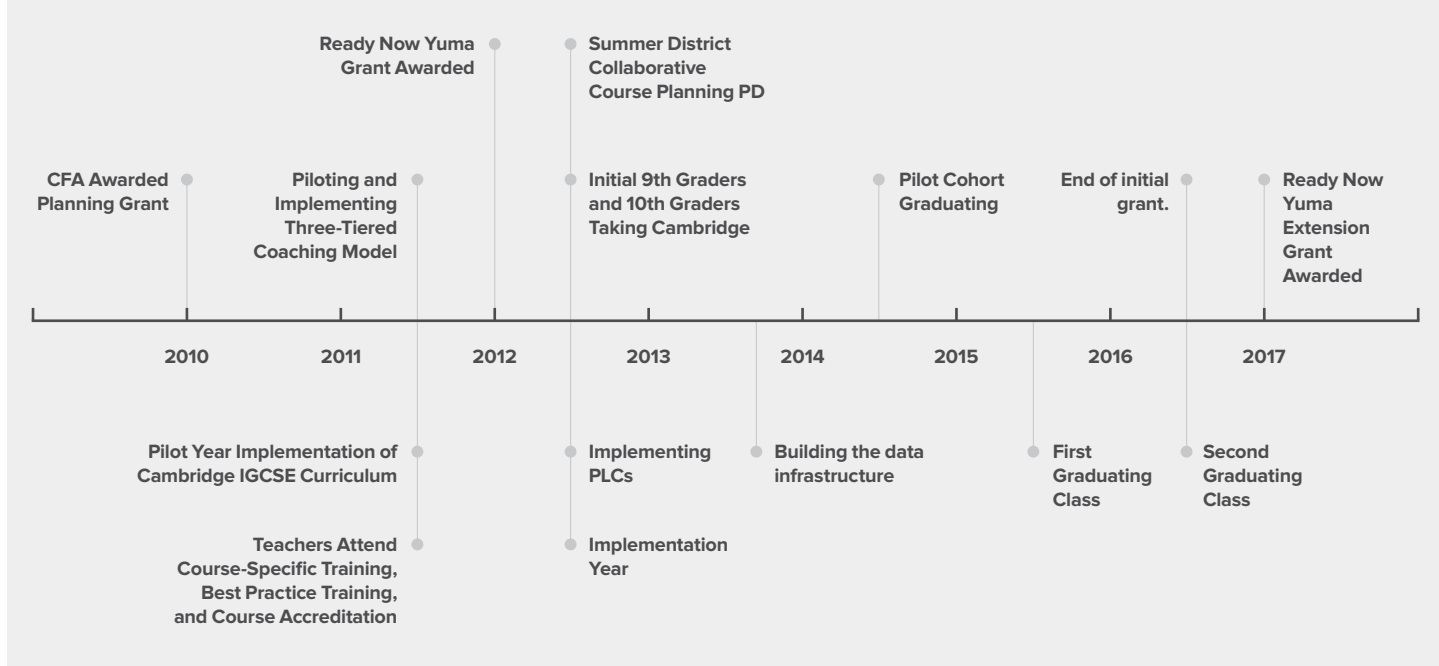








FIGURE 4

Graphic of 6 Yuma High Schools

						
	Cibola High School	Gila Ridge High School	Kofa High School	San Luis High School	Vista Alternative School	Yuma High School
Total Number of Students (2016-2017)	2607	1888	2291	2931	176	1142
% Hispanic (2016-2017)	81%	58%	88%	100%	86%	88%
College Going Rate (2015-2016 High School Graduates)	64%	68%	68%	76%	30%	61%

ALL STUDENTS

Rather than implementing the Ready Now Yuma initiative for a subset of students or schools, Helios and YUHSD chose to implement the initiative in each of the district's six high schools (see Figure 4). This type of rollout was demanding and required more intensive coordination between the district office and each school's leadership. At the same time, it led to more consistency in mission for the staff, as every school began gearing up to implement not only the Cambridge IGCSE curriculum but also all the other components that came with it.

Initial work on Ready Now Yuma began with a pre-planning grant awarded to CFA in September 2010. With support from Helios staff and consultants, CFA identified the initial components of Ready Now Yuma, which were detailed above, including the Cambridge IGCSE curriculum. Given the rigor of the Cambridge curriculum, YUHSD chose to devote the 2011–2012 academic year to piloting the curriculum and preparing teachers for the shift. During this pre-implementation year, teachers were sent to a series of Cambridge professional development trainings aimed at improving instructional practice.

At the conclusion of the 2011–2012 academic year, Helios awarded YUHSD the first of three grants, officially beginning the Ready Now Yuma initiative.² That summer (2012), district leadership began implementing cross-district collaborative training for each of the content areas (English, math, science, and social studies). These professional development trainings included teachers from each of the six schools and focused on aligning the curriculum so that each of the schools would be implementing the same courses and focusing on the same standards at the same time. In addition, the district began experimenting with PLCs for the teachers, student supports for those students struggling with the curriculum, and multiple pathways. Through formative feedback from on-going evaluations, YUHSD and Helios worked together to make continuous improvements over the 5-year period of the grant.

In the 2015–2016 academic year, YUHSD graduated its first class under Ready Now Yuma. The second graduating cohort followed in the spring of 2017 at the conclusion of the original Ready Now Yuma grant. With work still to accomplish, Helios and Yuma agreed to an additional 2-year grant in January 2017. The purpose of the extension grant is to improve alignment of the curriculum and instructional practice within the classrooms.

TO WHAT EXTENT DID READY NOW YUMA CREATE A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE IN YUMA?

According to the College Board (2006), creating a college-going culture “builds the expectation of postsecondary education for all students—not just the best students. It inspires the best in every student, and it supports students in achieving their goals”. Given this, YUHSD and Helios made it a priority to instill a college-going culture in the schools *and* to instill buy-in to this philosophy to the larger community.

To create this change in both the schools and the community, Helios and YUHSD collaborated on a long-term communication plan aimed at: (a) highlighting the need to prepare every student for postsecondary education; (b) sharing the goals of the Ready Now Yuma initiative; and (c) identifying ways for parents and the community to learn more about their schools. Under this plan YUHSD and Helios sought to create buy-in from all members of the community so that individuals would be more likely to support this school reform, but also in the hope that they would be more engaged under Ready Now Yuma. Connected with the actual work of Ready Now Yuma (e.g., rigorous curriculum, student supports), Helios's goal was to have community and business leaders, parents, teachers, administrators, students, and the community at large support the ideals of Ready Now Yuma.

To understand the extent to which Ready Now Yuma created a college-going culture in the schools and the city of Yuma, Helios and YUHSD commissioned two parallel studies. The first study, led by American Institutes for Research and Massell Education Consulting (AIR/MEC), focused on changes to the school culture as perceived by school administrators, teachers, and students and was part of Ready Now Yuma's program evaluation. The second study, implemented by the Morrison Institute for Public Policy, examined the changes to culture outside the schools as a result of Ready Now Yuma. Specifically, it looked at public perception regarding Ready Now Yuma creating a college-going culture among community members.

²Helios awarded two additional grants to YUHSD. In 2013 and 2015, Helios awarded grants on program evaluation and communication.

This section of the brief focuses on the key findings from those two studies, helping us better understand the extent to which Ready Now Yuma created and continues to strengthen a college-going culture within schools and the larger community. We highlight overall learnings (both positive and negative) from community and business leaders, teachers, parents, and students. Because most of the data come from interviews, focus groups, and surveys, we highlight in footnotes the number of respondents for each section. Last, we examine the extent to which Ready Now Yuma has influenced college-going rates in the district and provide the reader with a sense of how we will continue to monitor college-going and completion in the future.

COMMUNITY AND BUSINESS LEADERS

Overwhelmingly, community and business leaders in Yuma reported that they thought that the Ready Now Yuma initiative at YUHSD was preparing students for success in college and career. In support of this proposition, these leaders most often cited the adoption of the Cambridge IGCSE curriculum and the expansion of CTE courses.³

Nearly every community and business leader interviewed in the Morrison study reported being aware of the initiative, although understanding the reason for the initiative and specific details of what it entailed varied. Community and business leaders who were more involved in the schools (e.g., had children in the schools, served on the school board) identified Ready Now Yuma as a “shift in expectations for students.” These interviews show that community leaders believed that Ready Now Yuma was positively impacting the schools and the community.

Quotes from two community leaders illustrate this point:

“Ready [Now] Yuma brings the vision that we can help the children of Yuma County have a bright future. I strongly believe in their goal and mission.”

—Nonprofit leader

“Ready Now Yuma was a paradigm shift in how education was delivered and how students were taught. Instead of teaching to the middle, everyone is being taught to the highest degree.”

—Business leader

In addition to the higher expectations for students, it was also reported that schools were experiencing fewer disciplinary issuers. However, despite the positive changes many described, some community leaders expressed the need for improvement in the program. They mentioned that the standardized test scores and letter grades (school letter grades) did not reflect well on the investments being made in Yuma. Nevertheless, community and business leaders overwhelmingly supported the goals of Ready Now Yuma and stated that they were already seeing signs of its impact.

TEACHERS

At the start of Ready Now Yuma, district leadership knew that teacher buy-in would be key to the success of the initiative. Interviews with teachers suggest that some did not support the program initially. Teachers questioned whether all students would be able to handle the level of rigor that the Cambridge curriculum demanded. However, as the program progressed, teachers’ opinions regarding the program began to change. Data from interviews and focus groups conducted after the first 2 years of implementation show that a large majority of teachers supported the Cambridge curriculum and believed all students could succeed with it.

Many of the improved perceptions around the Cambridge curriculum connected to the implementation of PLCs in Yuma. Typically, PLCs are comprised of a group of educators who meet regularly to share expertise and to work collaboratively to improve instructional practice and their students’ academic performance. District leaders in YUHSD created PLCs as a primary strategy to strengthen the culture of learning for teachers. According to school leaders and teachers, this approach strengthened professional exchange and dialogue across schools and with district leaders.

Despite positive reports from teachers, areas for growth were also identified. For example, some teachers and administrators referenced a high degree of flexibility teachers were afforded in instruction, PLC attendance, and data use. This free rein, or independence, most likely resulted in some inconsistency in teaching practices and/or “watering down” of the curriculum. Successfully implementing a rigorous curriculum has been an ongoing challenge for the district, so much so that during the 2016–2017 school year, school leaders began to take steps to build more links to Cambridge and to impose specific actions. This alignment of instructional practice with the curriculum will continue to be a component of the Ready Now Yuma extension grant.

³Morrison Institute of Public Policy conducted interviews with 27 Yuma County community and business leaders. Both Helios and YUHSD assisted in developing a community leaders’ interview list. From that list Morrison sampled a group of respondents.

PARENTS

Surprisingly, Morrison's study revealed only half of the parents who were interviewed were aware of the initiative. Furthermore, what they knew and how they knew it varied greatly. Some parents reported finding out about Ready Now Yuma from billboards, while others seemed only to associate the Cambridge curriculum with the program. Overall, most parents had only surface-level knowledge of the initiative.⁴

While parents' knowledge of Ready Now Yuma was limited, most parents reported that they believed the schools were preparing students for college and career. Some parents, however, indicated that could vary from school to school. Additionally, some parents whose children were less successful indicated that their own children were overlooked. The parents in these cases wanted additional supports to help students navigate the coursework.

STUDENTS

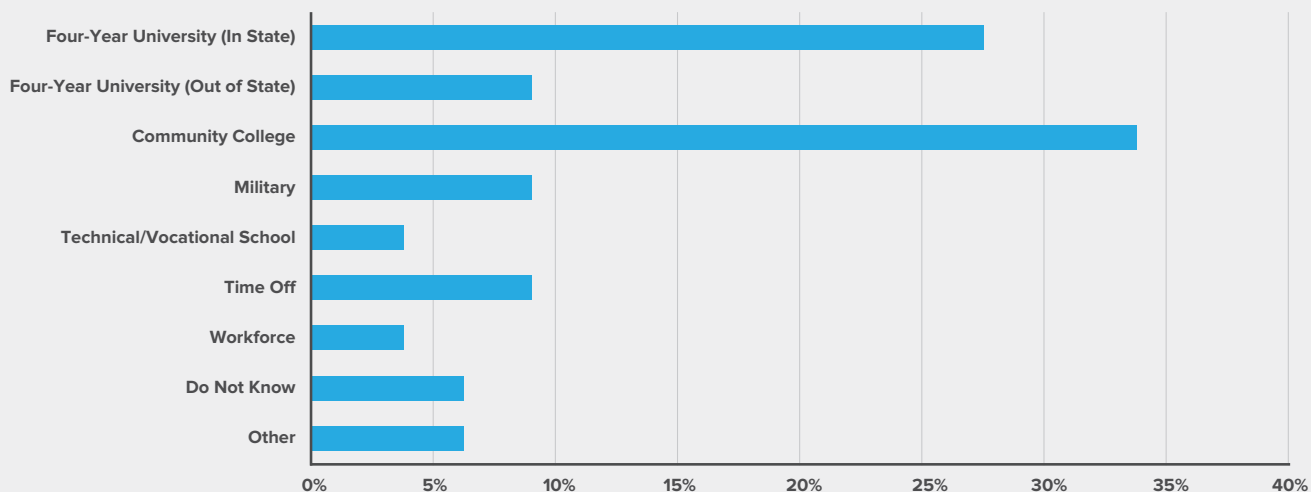
Perhaps the most meaningful findings regarding a college-going culture come from the students themselves. Focus groups and surveys revealed that most students believed their schools had improved since the implementation of Ready Now Yuma.⁵ In particular, students cited a growing emphasis on college readiness, stronger teachers, more opportunities for college coursework (e.g., AP courses), and better student outcomes. One student summed up improvements related to Ready Now Yuma succinctly:

"I know that we have more students who are graduating from high school and going on to college. I also know that students are more aware of the different careers that they can go into."

—11th grade student, female

FIGURE 5

Students' Reports of Their Plans Immediately Following High School



⁴To gauge parent understanding, Morrison conducted a set of four focus groups with parents of students from each of YUHSD's five comprehensive schools. In addition to the focus groups, Morrison conducted four follow-up interviews with parents who were not able to attend the focus group meetings.

⁵To gauge student learning on college and career readiness, Morrison carried out a survey with all juniors and seniors in the district. A total of 1,582 students out of 5,358 completed the survey. Morrison also conducted one focus group with 11th and 12th grade students and six individual interviews with students who could not make a second focus group.

Students also talked about the curriculum and the different paths Ready Now Yuma allowed them to take in creating a college-going culture. For some students the focus was on college preparatory courses, such as AP courses, while others emphasized opportunities from CTE courses. The following two quotes from students highlight these two pathways.

“I took AP literature last year, and that helped me get college credit. But it also helped me learn to be an effective writer, which is an important skill in college.”
—12th grade student, female

“I feel like my school has really helped me prepare to be what I want to be. Especially with the career and technical education classes, they help you get ready for what’s after high school.”
—12th grade student, male

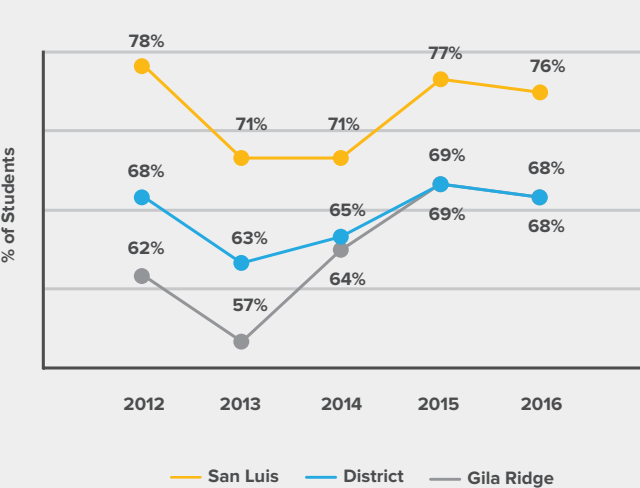
Further evidence in support of a growing college-going culture also emerged in the surveys that students completed in YUHSD. Juniors and seniors were asked about their plans immediately after graduation. As Figure 5 shows, nearly 70% of all respondents indicated that they intended to enroll in either a 2-year or a 4-year college. Less than 5% indicated that they envisioned going directly into the workforce. Unfortunately, nearly 18% of the students did not know their plans, chose other, or planned on just taking time off.

COLLEGE-GOING RATES

While the qualitative data reveal interesting details about the shift in college-going culture, our analysis also includes quantitative data to show how college-going rates have changed over time. We remind the reader that the first full year of implementation took place during the 2012–2013 academic year. That means that the first cohort of students to make it all the way through Ready Now Yuma graduated in the spring of 2016. At this time we have data only for that first cohort of students along with prior years of college-going rates. As Figure 6 shows, 68% of students from the first graduating cohort enrolled in college their first year after graduation. While slightly lower than one year prior, it is important to note that YUHSD’s college-going rate is one of the highest in the state. Our goal at Helios is to continue to track college-going rates of graduating cohorts, but more importantly to assess the extent to which students persist and complete. We will do this over the next 2 years under the Ready Now Yuma extension grant.

FIGURE 6

Yuma Union High School District
College-Going Rates With
Gila Ridge and San Luis
High School Comparisons



TO WHAT EXTENT DID YUHSD IMPROVE
STUDENT OUTCOMES?

While creating a high-expectation, college-going culture was important to the initiative, ultimate success depended on improving student outcomes in the district. To do this Helios, AIR/MEC, and YUHSD identified a set of research-based indicators to monitor program success. This resulted in three groupings of indicators: Leading, Intermediate, and Lagging. Leading indicators are those that can be examined early on in students’ high school careers, in this case 9th and 10th grades. Intermediate and outcome indicators measure students’ progress toward graduation. Lagging indicators are measures of high school completion and postsecondary enrollment, persistence, and completion. Table 1 shows a subset of indicators discussed in this section.

TABLE 1:

Measures of Student Outcomes/Achievement Under Ready Now Yuma

Leading Indicators	Intermediate and Outcome Indicators	Lagging Indicators
9th Grade Course Failure Rates 9th Grade GPAs District Suspensions	ACT College Readiness Benchmarks and Scores	Graduation Rates College-Going Rates

KEY ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Over the course of Ready Now Yuma, our external evaluation found “substantial improvement in students’ engagement in school and access to rigorous curriculums and learning opportunities.” However, trends in student outcomes and achievement were mixed. We found that YUHSD made steady progress with leading indicators and with increases in graduation rates. Yet, when it came to student achievement as measured by the ACT college entrance examination or AzMerit, we observed little to no growth. Below are highlights of the key gains in student outcomes over the course of Ready Now Yuma:

- The district made gains in graduation rates among 12th graders.** The percentage of Grade 12 students who started and graduated from high school in that same year jumped from 71% in 2011–2012 to 83% in 2015–2016. At San Luis High School, the rate rose by 24 percentage points.
- The district saw an increase in 11th and 12th graders participating in AP courses and sitting for at least one AP exam.** The percentage of upper classmen taking one or more AP courses grew from 20% in 2011–2012 to 29% by 2015–2016. This growth included students from low-income families. In 2011–2012, 18% of students from low-income families enrolled in an AP course, but by 2015–2016, enrollment rates had grown to 29%. Furthermore, there was an increase in the percentage of students who took an AP course and sat for at least one AP exam—from 79% in 2011–2012 to 88% in 2015–2016.
- Ninth graders received better course grades.** YUHSD has seen a 6% increase in the proportion of Grade 9 students who have a GPA of 2.0 (C average) or higher. In 2011–2012, only 55% of students achieved this threshold, while 61% did in 2015–2016. On a related note, the district has seen improvement in the proportion of Grade 9 students with an end-of-year GPA of 3.0 or higher.
- Ninth-grade student course failures declined.** The percentage of Grade 9 students who failed one or more courses (during any grading period) has decreased 45%, from 86% in 2011–2012 to 41% in 2015–2016. This drop is most evident between the 2013–2014 and 2014–2015 school years. In 2015–2016, this trend continued at all schools except Yuma High School, which saw an increase in Grade 9 students’ course failure rates. The percentage of students who earn passing grades in all Grade 9 courses has likewise improved dramatically, from 14% in the 2011–2012 school year to 59% in the 2015–2016 school year, with improvements of at least 33 percentage points at YUHSD schools.
- Fewer students were suspended.** YUHSD saw drastic decreases in the number of students receiving student suspensions under Ready Now Yuma. From 2012 to 2017 suspensions decreased by more than 55%.

FIGURE 7

Key Accomplishment Under (Ready Now Yuma)

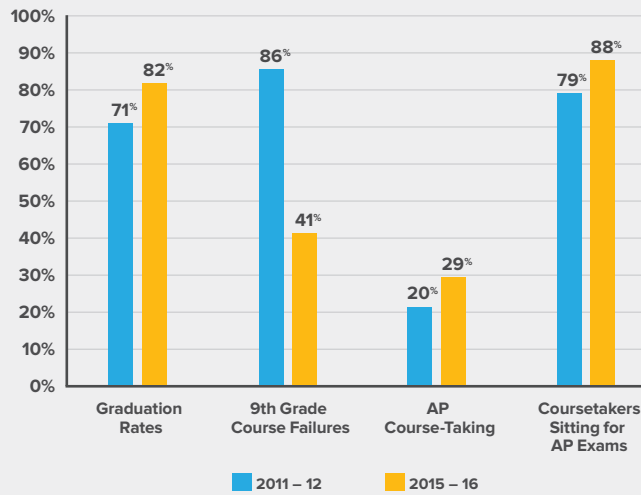
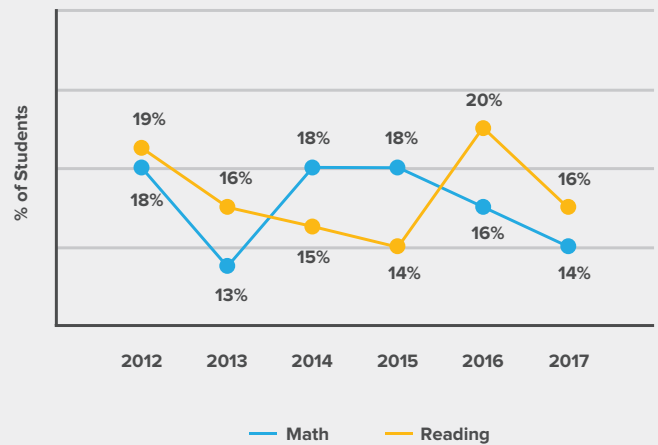


FIGURE 8

Proportion of Yuma Union High School District Students Meeting ACT College Readiness Benchmarks



CHALLENGES

Despite clear evidence that the district was having a positive impact on students across a number of outcomes, we observed little change in student achievement {as measured by ACT} during Ready Now Yuma’s implementation. Figure 8 shows the proportion of students meeting the ACT College Readiness benchmarks in both math and reading. Growth in the proportion of students meeting the benchmarks was flat. Similarly, we found only modest gains (3%–4% increases) in student scores in English, reading, mathematics, and science. When taken as a whole, these data seem to suggest that while YUHSD has improved equity in access, much more needs to be done to improve overall student learning.

WHAT ARE KEY LESSONS LEARNED FROM IMPLEMENTATION THAT CAN INFORM READY NOW YUMA GOING FORWARD AND FUTURE WORK?

Despite a high level of success in creating a college-going culture and improving student outcomes, Ready Now Yuma fell short in impacting student achievement as measured by ACT College Readiness benchmarks. By closely monitoring the implementation of the initiative over the last 5 years, we are in a position to identify three key challenges that limited overall impact on student achievement. The following section describes these challenges, as well as identifies plans to address them.

ENSURING THE ESTABLISHMENT OF A HIGH-EXPECTATIONS CURRICULUM

Perhaps the greatest achievement under Ready Now Yuma has been YUHSD’s dedication in implementing the Cambridge IGCSE curriculum. Between 2012 and 2017, more than 17,000 students enrolled in Cambridge IGCSE courses throughout the district. Of those students, nearly 70% enrolled in postsecondary courses after graduating from high school. Yet, as discussed in the previous section, there has been little growth in overall achievement scores for students in YUHSD.

Challenges around the Cambridge curriculum was one of the major factors affecting the growth in student achievement. Evaluators identified three specific areas of concern related to this curriculum. The first has to do with the nature of the program: Cambridge IGCSE does not provide specific guidance on everyday instructional practices and procedures. Therefore, it was up to schools and departments to make sense of pacing guides and course standards before they could build individual lessons and formative assessments. Along the way some of the course curriculums put into place in YUHSD were misaligned, meaning that students might not necessarily be learning the requisite standards. Fidelity to the curriculum was another area that may have impacted student achievement. In Yuma, like in many districts, teachers were afforded much freedom in how to teach the Cambridge curriculum. Through classroom observations



and interviews, external evaluators found that some teachers were not teaching specific standards, and, in many cases, teacher practices varied greatly. Finally, high teacher attrition throughout the district meant that new teachers were continuously joining the district. This meant onboarding new teachers who had to catch up on both the requirements of Cambridge and the instructional practices needed to deliver the curriculum.

By the end of the 2015–2016 academic year, the district was beginning to recognize these challenges and the effects they were having on student achievement. YUHSD has decided that the way to remedy this is to better support teachers and provide clear expectations for instructional practice related to Cambridge IGCSE. A curriculum specialist hired by the district has been charged with the task of ensuring alignment between course standards, assessments, and teaching practices. To ensure that teachers are understanding the expectations associated with Cambridge IGCSE, the district is also providing enhanced professional development to improve instructional practice. Moreover, the district is providing additional oversight in each of the schools to ensure fidelity of practice. In addition to these internal efforts, YUHSD has contracted with a set of external experts to make sure that all the pieces of the curriculum (i.e., standards, assessment, and practice) are aligned.

FIGURING OUT HOW TO SUPPORT STUDENTS

Without a doubt one of the most challenging aspects of the Ready Now Yuma initiative was finding the best ways to support struggling students. Many YUHSD students were at a disadvantage immediately upon entering high school. According to the most recent release of AzMerit, roughly two thirds of all students entering high school in YUHSD score below proficiency in reading and mathematics. Given this, and the addition of a rigorous, high-expectations curriculum, it becomes apparent that students were going to need support to master the content tied to the standards.

At the beginning of the Ready Now Yuma grant, YUHSD leadership and Helios agreed to implement a student support structure that would (a) remediate deficiencies students had upon entering high school and (b) help students master the Cambridge IGCSE curriculum. However, a comprehensive set of student supports accomplishing these goals was never completed. Much of the reason this never happened can be attributed to lack

of capacity. Over the 5-year grant, the district focused on how to implement the curriculum and improve instructional practice. With the focus on these two elements, decisions about how to create a comprehensive support system were delayed, resulting in a system that focused more on voluntary tutoring, opportunities to retake tests or redo assignments, and credit recovery programs, which were not enough to meet students' needs.

Moving forward, YUHSD plans to continue to seek programs and supports to help struggling students. One way that they are currently expanding opportunities is by training teachers and administrators to use response to intervention strategies. These strategies are aimed at helping teachers meet students where they are academically so that teachers can scaffold support to get students where they need to be.

CREATING SYSTEMIC CHANGE TO REDUCE TEACHER ATTRITION

One of the greatest challenges that influenced the Ready Now Yuma initiative was the annual attrition of a large proportion of teachers—between 20% and 25% districtwide. Teachers most often identified finances as the reason behind their decision to leave. Some teachers left for positions out of state where they could earn higher salaries, while others left to pursue higher paying careers or opportunities. This challenge does not have a quick fix and is an issue that many districts and schools face in Arizona.

CONCLUSION

Since the start of the 2011–2012 academic year, YUHSD has worked tirelessly to prepare every student in the district for success in college and career. Specific accomplishments include: (a) implementing a rigorous, internationally benchmarked curriculum, (b) supporting teachers with specific professional development training and embedded instructional and data coaches, (c) identifying and establishing supports for students who struggle with the curriculum, and (d) offering multiple pathways for students to align their interests with curricular requirements.

At the same time, YUHSD has shown that its commitment to creating a college-going culture has paid off. Both community and business leaders reported that they think the district is creating a college-going culture and preparing students for their futures. Likewise, teachers have reported buy-in to the belief that Ready Now Yuma can prepare every student for college and career while simultaneously indicating they are taking the steps to promote that type of culture in the schools (e.g., increased focus on standards, using data to improve instruction). Parents, while generally less knowledgeable about Ready Now Yuma, tend to report that Yuma is preparing students for life after high school. Most importantly, students indicate a high value in Ready Now Yuma, whose impact is shown through the high proportions of students planning on and actually enrolling in postsecondary education after high school.

However, while the district continues to improve its college-going culture, it also continues to struggle to improve overall student achievement. To be fair, the district has made great headway in improving course passage rates, GPAs, and graduation rates, and in reducing student suspensions. Yet when viewed in terms of student achievement as measured by the ACT College Entrance Examination or Arizona’s state test, AzMerit, the district’s efforts have remained flat.

Much of the lack in achievement can be explained in breakdowns in implementation. As discussed in portions of the brief and in earlier reports, the district struggled with balancing teachers’ autonomy in the classroom with the oversight required of an aligned curriculum. To combat this, the district has taken major steps to strengthen its guidance and align its curriculum more tightly while implementing greater oversight over teacher- and school-level practices. To support this work, Helios has awarded YUHSD a 2-year extension grant to ensure alignment between course standards, teacher instructional practices, and assessments.

At the same time, YUHSD struggled to identify a system of student supports that could effectively help students who were struggling with the curriculum. Over the 5-year grant, the district continued to offer tutoring, created a new credit recovery program, installed retake and reteach policies, and began initial professional development trainings in response to intervention. Nevertheless, there needs to be continued focus on enhancing student supports. Moving forward, YUHSD must identify an effective support system that gives teachers the opportunity to monitor student performance effectively, along with “targeted” supports to address deficiencies.

Overall, there is much to celebrate in Yuma County. YUHSD has created a college-going culture that has penetrated beyond school walls to influence community leaders, business leaders, and parents. At the same time, the district has laid the foundation to improve the outcomes of each and every student in the district. Over the next 2 years, by improving alignment of the curriculum and by identifying more targeted supports, we would expect to see increases in all student outcomes, but especially in student achievement.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research has highlighted the need for key strategies to improve student outcomes in Arizona public schools. We recommend increased commitment and focus in the following three areas:

Increase teacher salaries to reduce teacher attrition.

In Yuma and across Arizona as a whole, we see high teacher attrition rates. Oftentimes teacher attrition can be attributed to teacher pay. In Yuma, for example, the district loses between 20% and 25% of its teachers annually. Sometimes these teachers have moved out of state for higher paying jobs, while other times they have moved into other careers. To have long-term and sustainable success, Arizona needs high-quality teachers who stay in their positions long term.

Provide districts more resources and training to align curriculum, instruction, and assessments.

Most teachers leave teacher training programs with only a basic understanding of curriculum alignment. Research has shown that when teachers are provided adequate training, tools, and time to work with curriculums, their students typically achieve at higher levels. With the new Arizona Standards in place, state educational leaders must ensure that teachers are given the tools to be successful.

Increase focus on student supports.

In Yuma's high schools and in many others across Arizona, students enter the system with deficiencies in reading and mathematics. Without targeted support to address these deficiencies, we see that students fall farther behind in most cases. We argue that more focus is warranted to support students who are struggling when they enter high school. A number of targeted programs in mathematics and reading already exist. We ask that educational leaders provide resources to schools so that they can implement them.

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