



Missouri's A+ Tutoring Resource: A Status Study Executive Summary

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This study grew out of The Hoenny Center's ongoing interest in pre-college programs that help K-12 students build their teaching skills. In this regard, the Missouri A+ program is a national leader: No other state links school improvement with tutoring, thus involving students in the project, and no other state requires 50+ hours of tutoring to receive the benefits.

In this study, we were interested in exploring the following questions:

1. What patterns emerge in the current loads, specialties, years of experience, and anticipated future involvement of A+ coordinators?
2. What themes dominate the experiential content of local A+ tutoring programs?
3. What variations exist in these themes according to setting (rural, suburban, urban), school and program demographics, and changes in faculty sponsors (multi-year/first-year involvement, volunteer leader/assigned leader, etc.)?
4. To what extent are courses and extracurricular future teacher programs available to A+ tutors?

Missouri's School Improvement Program in the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) consists of several initiatives, one of which is the A+ high schools program. About half (274) of Missouri's high schools have passed the A+ program qualification procedures as of the summer of 2009. The high school program coordinators of all 274 high schools in May and/or September 2009 constituted the population of this study. About two-fifths (163, or 59.5%) of these coordinators responded to the survey, allowing a 95% confidence level on the results.

The procedure

In November 2008, leaders of Missouri's School Improvement Program in the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) granted The Hoenny Center permission to study the Missouri A+ tutoring program. The Missouri questionnaire was drafted in winter 2008-09 and comment was solicited from DESE A+ program leaders.

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The questionnaire was adjusted several times in spring 2009, and a copy was distributed by email in mid-April 2009 to 43 St. Louis-area A+ coordinators. We met with 20 of them on May 8, soliciting comments on the draft questionnaire and hearing suggestions for improving it.

Also in May 2009, The Hoenny Center contracted Suzanne Hembrough, a retiring veteran A+ Coordinator, as Research Associate to follow up with non-respondents.

The questionnaire was further revised, and an online draft version was mounted on Survey Monkey on May 18. DESE leaders and two local A+ coordinators who were in the May 8 meeting were asked to look at the online revision and provide comments.

We drafted an invitation to be sent by email from DESE leaders to all 274 A+ coordinators, and, after some adjustments, it was sent on June 18. The first invitation returned 76 surveys. A second invitation, with an October 1 deadline, was emailed to all coordinators on August 31. That invitation, along with follow-up phone calls and emails from our Research Associate returned 88 additional surveys. Nine respondents' surveys were lost in apparent technical problems with Survey Monkey. We closed the survey on October 20 with 163 valid responses.

Conclusions

We explored four questions in this study, and what follows is organized by these questions.

1. What patterns emerge in the current loads, specialties, years of experience, and anticipated future involvement of A+ coordinators?

On the whole, this is a stable, experienced group of leaders who become committed to the work once they are engaged in it. About one-fourth are new enough to the position that some peer mentoring might be a good idea if it is not in place already. The findings suggest support for attention to new coordinators: just short of 30% had less than five years' experience as coordinator. But the dominant group (just over 70%) are veteran coordinators, a number to be celebrated. Retired coordinators who remain close to their districts might be engaged as mentors to new coordinators in their areas.

The results show that A+ schools are similar in many particulars to the state's school district characteristics—not surprising, since just over half of the state's high schools have achieved A+ designation. There was no judgment made about the reported economic characteristics of the A+ high school communities in this study, but African-Americans are underrepresented in the A+ high schools studied here when compared with the state's school demographics. Other racial groups in A+ high schools and A+ programs are close to state demographic proportions.

The gender mix was interesting: 57.07% of A+ student participants were female. The national percentage of females in p-12 education positions was 79.72% in 2008. If a goal is to increase the male percentage in teaching, then, recruiting and retaining male A+ tutors in teaching would seem to be a good place for some effort to keep males interested in teaching careers.

2. What themes dominate the experiential content of local A+ tutoring programs?

The top five experiences provided to participants involve actual tutoring or learning about tutoring. Except for the basic 50-hour requirement, the mix of tutoring types (grade levels of tutees; remedial vs. enrichment offerings) and timing (summer vs. school year) in these experiences was not explored here, but such a study would be an interesting one. Courses or workshops in tutoring were required by less than one-third of responding high schools.

Tutoring, I contend, is basic to teaching well. No one learns for someone else, regardless of whether one is a class member or a private client in a teacher's care. A+ program participants are learning from the ground up what individual differences really are (from their fellow students who actually have these differences), what teachers think about in the middle of the night, and where the real rewards are in teaching. Our interviews and observations with A+ tutors in other studies confirm that this program, based as it is on 50 hours of tutoring, has its strongest resource well in hand.

What is needed, in addition, is for the rest of A+ high schools to enact three expansions on what some program leaders are already offering: 1) courses or extended workshops in tutoring and teaching, 2) opportunities for tutors to discuss their experiences with a professional educator as facilitator, and 3) stronger linkages with teacher education programs in colleges, especially state colleges and universities in Missouri. These should be available to all A+ program participants.

3. *What variations exist in these themes according to setting (rural, suburban, urban), school and program demographics, and changes in faculty sponsors (multi-year/first-year involvement, volunteer leader/assigned leader, etc.)?*

It seems clear that A+ tutoring program opportunities and sizes are functions of local leadership, local factors that affect what is possible, and localized student responses to these offerings. Unlike the issue of expanding the range of special curricular opportunities (for example, staffing AP or vocational and technology courses) a wide range of A+ program learning opportunities are being made available regardless of school size or setting, program age, and years of the leader's teaching or A+ coordinating experience.

In 2009, Missouri school districts, both with and without A+ high schools, awarded an average of 136.23 diplomas, according to data from DESE. Missouri districts with A+ high schools awarded an average of 185.7 diplomas in 2009. These are numbers worth celebrating, as they suggest strong support for the contention that A+ school improvement programs promote high school completion throughout their districts. It is my contention that A+ tutoring is a primary cause of this outcome. We have observed the strong bonds and good modeling that occur between service-minded high school students and their elementary school-aged tutees. Over time, this links the elementary students with exemplars of academic success and helps to forge social bonds with older students in the district.

4. *To what extent are courses and extracurricular future teacher programs available to A+ tutors?*

We've found that high school students who tutor want and need teaching tips and facilitated discussions with other tutors about the work. However, relatively few A+ programs, about one-third, provide these features as regular parts of the program. Workshops, discussion groups, and courses about teaching should be expanded. This will considerably strengthen the program and improve tutor effectiveness.

That said, based on our observation of similar programs from other states and our national study of the Future Educator Association (FEA) program, we can assert that A+ tutoring participants are currently learning more about teaching by doing it, and they actually tutor far more extensively than is nationally the case. For example, FEA "honor programs" require only six hours of similar teaching experience of students.

Final thoughts

A+ tutoring is an unheralded Missouri strength. A+ tutors contribute to the state's educational effort with an estimated 750,000 hours of tutoring per year, based on data in this study. The difference between diploma averages in A+ and non-A+ school districts, we contend, is accounted for by this active tutoring. It is difficult to account for all variables between A+ and non-A+ schools, of course, but A+ tutoring is a district-wide resource where it exists and tutoring is a primary, identifiable contrast between A+ and non-A+ districts.

Missouri has made an effort toward statewide articulation among resources in its educational system through the P20 Council. The A+ tutoring program provides the foundation for what should be the P20 Council's next push: a P20 approach to the development of future Missouri teachers. Increasing the proportion of African-American teachers, males, and young people with significant early teaching experience are all good outcomes of such efforts.

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