



# Big IDEAs

Dropout  
Prevention  
Strategies

## Achievement for Latinos Through Academic Success (ALAS)

### Purpose

Founded on the idea that student success is shaped by three inter-related contexts—family, school and community—Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS) demonstrates an effective dropout prevention and reentry/recovery strategy that strengthens student supports in each context and builds stronger linkages among them.

### Target Population

ALAS was developed, implemented and evaluated from 1990 to 1996 as a pilot intervention program in a low-income, urban, predominantly Latino middle school in Los Angeles. The program focused on youth with disabilities, using a collaborative approach across influences of home, school, and community.

### Major Components

As detailed below, the ALAS model involved four interrelated program components for (1) students, (2) schools, (3) families and (4) communities. The program focused on middle school, the juncture at which students are most likely to drop out of school and emphasized a combination of psycho-social and academic interventions.

*Students:* Through a student component, ALAS provided counseling, training in social and task-related problem solving skills, and recognition for academic excellence.

*School:* The program's school component involved recognition and bonding activities, frequent teacher feedback to parents and students, and intensive attendance monitoring.

#### *Family:*

The family component engaged parents in training to increase their participation in

school activities and to support their student's academic improvement, and encouraged more frequent contact with teachers and school administrators.

*Community:* Through a community component, ALAS provided a bridge between school and home needs and community services (including mental health, social services, drug and alcohol treatment programs, job training, and sports and recreation programs).

Within these four program components, ALAS implemented the following interventions:

1. Helping students strengthen problem-solving skills and social interactions through ten weeks of problem-solving instruction and two years of follow-up problem-solving training and counseling.
2. Building students' self-esteem, affiliation, and a sense of belonging at school through personal recognition and relationships with caring adults. Participating students received frequent positive reinforcement such as praise, recognition ceremonies, certificates, outings, and positive home calls to parents for meeting goals or improving behavior, attendance, and school work. Students could "hang out" in the ALAS lounge on breaks and after school and bring friends to ALAS parties. In general, they were made to feel nurtured by ALAS staff.
3. Improving student attendance and engagement not only through intensive attendance monitoring with daily contacts and follow up with parents, but also by helping students make up missed time in the program and academic work.

ALAS staff increased student attendance by expressing a personal interest in their presence and participation in school.

4. Providing mechanisms for frequent teacher feedback to parents and students about classroom behavior, assignment completion, and homework. Through their problem-solving training, students were taught to incorporate teacher feedback to sharpen their thinking and problem-solving skills.
5. Parent training on accessing community resources, as well as training on how to support behavioral changes, how to assess adolescent engagement in school, how and when to participate in school activities, how to review report cards and school credits, and how and when to contact teachers and administrators..
6. Integrating school and home needs with community services. Parents received information on a broad range of community resources, such as psychiatric and mental health services, alcohol and drug counseling, social services, child protective services, parenting classes, gang intervention projects, recreation and sports programs, probation, and work programs.

### **Evidence of Effectiveness**

A rigorous evaluation of ALAS showed dramatic, positive results for enhancing educational achievement during the intervention and one year after the intervention. At the end of ninth grade, for example, only 3% of ALAS students had dropped out of school compared to 18% of the highest-risk control students. Beyond merely keeping students in school, ALAS had a statistically significant impact on keeping students on track, improving their academic success and progress toward graduation. Program evaluators reported that 75% of ALAS students were on track to graduate within a four-year timeframe, compared to 44% of the comparison students. ALAS students improved school

grades for ninth grade classes and failed fewer classes than students in the comparison group. Students also improved their attendance. Findings also suggest that ALAS students benefited psychologically, socially and attitudinally from the interventions. ALAS evaluators, however, also found that ALAS-type interventions must be sustained through the high school years to secure long-term gains.

### **Implementation Considerations**

As the ALAS model depended on strengthening relationships among students, parents, teachers and community members, the program required new levels of rapport and trust. To achieve this, ALAS program operators and evaluators report that the program was challenged to interact across cultural barriers that traditionally separated classrooms from communities, students from social services, and faculty from families. To succeed, new bonds needed to be built with at-risk Latino students who had felt disowned by a school and environment that did not reflect their culture. For case management to be effective, ALAS staff needed to negotiate with faculty and school administrators, changing, for example disciplinary actions from suspension to additional tutoring and support. Respecting parents, students, agency personnel and faculty was critical to program success and facilitated openness to ALAS staff recommendations and built stronger intercultural relationships and student supports. While many efforts focused on developing stronger relationships among parents, teachers and school staff, ALAS implementers emphasized that building bonds with at-risk students was both a central challenge and critical to the success of the model.

By Laurie Posner, MPA  
Intercultural Development Research Association