ASPIRE AWARD INQUIRY REPORT
2008–2009

Introduction

The 2008-2009 ASPIRE Award program, designed to award teachers and staff for students' progress and performance in the 2008-2009 school year, was paid out on January 27, 2010. The Principal Re-confirmation Period was open from October 7 through October 21, 2009. This period allowed principals to view the final categorization, eligibility, and percentage time on campus awarded for the staff at their campus and request changes where necessary. These data were exposed prior to award calculations, in an attempt to make as many corrections as possible before awarded amounts were attached to individuals.

Awards were then calculated and award notices were posted live on the ASPIRE portal on December 11, 2009, at which time the formal inquiry process opened. All current staff were able to submit an inquiry via the ASPIRE portal from December 11, 2009 through January 11, 2010. Individuals who were no longer employed were contacted by the Research & Accountability and Human Resources departments. These individuals were mailed their award notice, eligibility documentation, an inquiry form, and directions for submitting inquiries, and were directed to submit any necessary inquiries via mail or fax with the inquiry form provided or via a secure online site.

What follows is a detailed description of the inquiries that were submitted for the 2008-2009 award year.

Results

A total of 22,924 employees were considered for the 2008-2009 ASPIRE Award. A total of 621 (2.7%) inquiries were submitted as part of the 2008-2009 ASPIRE Award Teacher Inquiry period. As a frame of reference, a total of 721 inquiries, or 3.8% of the total number of employees considered, were submitted as part of the 2007-2008 ASPIRE Award Teacher Inquiry period (see **Table 1**).

Table 1: 2007-2008 to 2008-2009 Inquiry Comparison

Award Year	Number Considered	Number of Inquiries:							
		Submitted		Withdrawn		Resolved with Changes		Resolved no changes	
		N	%*	N	%^	N	%^	N	%^
2007-2008	19,201	721	3.8%	34	4.7%	339	47.0%	287	39.8%
2008-2009	22,924	621	2.7%	2	0.3%	167	26.9%	452	72.8%

 * Percent of all employees considered

 ^ Percent of all inquiries submitted

Of the 621 total inquiries for the 2008-2009 award program, 2 (<1%) were withdrawn, 167 (26.9%) were resolved with changes, and 452 (72.8%) were resolved with no changes. Inquiries were placed into one of seven types of issues, as displayed in **Table 2**.

Charter Issues

Five inquiries (1% of the total number of inquiries submitted) were related to the eligibility of charter school employees. Charter school employees are not included in the district's PeopleSoft human resources database; therefore, their 2005-2006 through 2008-2009 eligibility has been determined with different data obtained from the campus principals and/or administrators. The majority (3 inquiries) were resolved with no changes.

Table 2: Inquiry Type by Resolution

	Resolution Type		Total	Percent
	Resolved no changes	**Resolved with changes**		
Total	**454 (73%)**	**167 (27%)**	**621**	
Charter Issues	**3**	**2**	**5**	**1%**
Charter Eligibility	3	2	5	
Communication Issues	**159**	**0**	**159**	**26%**
Award Calculation Question	159	0	159	
Value-Added Issues	**45**	**1**	**46**	**7%**
1-yr vs 3-yr Analysis	3	0	3	
Spanish to English	4	0	4	
Value-added Report/Low Student Number	38	1	39	
Verification/Confirmation Issues	**78**	**77**	**155**	**25%**
Campus Assignment	3	18	21	
Categorization	37	46	83	
Regional Campus-Based Employees	15	5	20	
Subject Assignment	7	4	11	
Elementary Librarians	0	2	2	
Student Linkages	16	2	18	
HR Issues	**124**	**87**	**211**	**34%**
Attendance Hours	13	5	18	
Eligibility	38	2	40	
Eligibility - Attendance	70	76	146	
Pending/Terminated	3	4	7	
Award Notice Issues	**8**	**0**	**8**	**1%**
Strand IIIC Writing	8	0	8	
Policy Decisions	**24**	**0**	**24**	**4%**
Campus Network Specialist	2	0	2	
Literacy Coach	7	0	7	
Nurses	3	0	3	
Reading/ELA Middle School	10	0	10	
Registrars	2	0	2	
Not Applicable Issues	**13**	**0**	**13**	**2%**
Principal submitting on behalf	9	0	9	
Not Award Related	2	0	2	
User Withdrawn	2	0	2	

Communication Issues

Twenty-six percent of the total number of inquiries (159) related directly to the communication of the ASPIRE award program and employees' lack of understanding of the program, and were categorized as

award calculation questions. This type of inquiry consisted of questions related to the determination of the award, for which no changes were necessary.

Value-Added Issues

Forty-six inquiries (7%) were regarding questions or perceived problems with the employee's value-added analysis, calculated by SAS-EVAAS®:

1-year versus 3-year Analysis (3 inquiries): At the inception of the ASPIRE program, the district provided three years' worth of test data to EVAAS®, which was used to provide the initial one-year NCE gains. Every year, the district provides another year's worth of test data to EVAAS®, enabling improvement in the stability and reliability of the measures. Because the district is now in the third year of this program, EVAAS® now has sufficient years' worth of test data to provide three-year mean NCE gains and calculate the associated gain indexes. The EVAAS® portal displays three-year NCE gains, while the ASPIRE Awards are based on composite and cumulative gain indexes determined from one-year NCE gains. All three inquiries of this type submitted were resolved with no changes.

Spanish to English (4 inquiries): A few teachers had questions regarding the value-added score with regards to the students who were transitioning from the Spanish versions of tests to the English versions of tests. These individuals showed an interest in whether the transition had been taken into account in the calculation of their gain index. All four inquiries of this type were resolved with no changes.

Value-added Report/Low Student Number (39 inquiries): Many of these inquiries were submitted because the teacher did not receive a value-added report for one or more subjects. This was because the teacher did not have enough effective students verified. In order to receive a value-added report, it was required that the teacher claim a minimum of seven effective students per subject and grade level. The minimum number of required students was set to ensure the highest level of validity with the highest number of teachers able to receive a teacher-level report. The other major type of inquiry submitted of this type were questions related to the difference between an NCE gain and a gain index. While the teacher-level value-added report displays both the Teacher NCE gain and the Teacher Gain Index, the ASPIRE Award program uses the Teacher Gain Index for award purposes. The majority (38) of these inquiries were resolved with no changes; one was resolved with changes, as allegations of testing improprieties were supported which adversely affected the teacher's gain index.

Verification/Confirmation Issues

Twenty-five percent of the total number of submitted inquiries were related to the verification and/or confirmation process, and were of seven types:

Campus Assignment (21 inquiries): In the majority of these cases, the employee was assigned to multiple campuses, but was only verified and approved at one campus, or was not verified at any campus for the minimum 40% time required during the linkage and verification process. In some cases, the employee was paid from one campus, but actually worked on another campus. The majority of these inquiries were resolved with changes.

Categorization (83 inquiries): These types of inquires included core versus noncore teachers; and job description versus job duties (for example, literacy coaches who felt they should have been considered as core reading teachers). Just over half of these inquiries were resolved with changes.

Regional Campus-based Employees (20 inquiries): This year, campus assignment data for employees who are paid from the regional offices but who worked on one or more campuses during the school year was collected during the summer and subject to principal review and confirmation in the fall. In order to receive the ASPIRE award, it was required that the employee be assigned to and work on a campus a minimum of 40% time. In the majority of these inquiries, specialists assigned to multiple

campuses were not verified or approved at any campus, or the assignments provided by their supervisors were supported by the campus principals. The majority of these inquiries were resolved with no changes.

Subject Assignment (11 inquiries): These types of inquiries included verifying more, less, or different subjects than they should have. Few of these errors occurred that resulted in changes, and those who did have changes were individuals who did not have teacher-level value-added results produced for their categorization (high school and special education core teachers).

Elementary Librarian (2 inquiries): If an elementary school librarian was on an ancillary rotation and could provide supporting documentation, they could be placed in Category F (noncore/ancillary teachers). This could only occur through override requests completed during principal confirmation or the inquiry period. The librarians who submitted an inquiry were able to provide supporting documentation, and were changed from Category G (instructional support staff) to Category F. These inquiries were resolved with changes.

Student Linkages (18 inquiries): These types of inquiries resulted from a core teacher not verifying any students. As such, no teacher report was produced, and the teacher's award was subject to special analysis. The majority of these inquiries were resolved with no changes.

HR Issues

Thirty-four percent of the total number of submitted inquiries related directly to the Human Resources eligibility issues, and were of four types:

Attendance Hours (18 inquiries): Individuals submitted inquiries regarding their attendance hours used to calculate their attendance bonus. When changes were made, it was incumbent upon the employee and the campus to submit corrections through the campus-based timekeeper. The majority of these inquiries were resolved with no changes.

Eligibility (40 inquiries): Individuals submitted inquiries regarding their general eligibility. The majority of these inquiries were resolved with no changes.

Eligibility – Attendance (146 inquiries): For the 2008-2009 award period, in order to qualify for the award, it was required that employees be in attendance for a minimum of 90% of the 175 instructional school days, or be absent less than 136.5 hours. Protected leave types such as FML, assault leave, and funeral leave were held harmless in the calculation of their eligibility. Individuals submitted inquiries specifically regarding their ineligibility for award based on their number of hours absent. When changes were made, it was incumbent upon the employee to provide the appropriate documentation to support a claim of retroactive FML or other protected leave time. In approximately half of the cases, employees submitted the appropriate documentation, were changed to eligible, and had their awards recalculated.

Pending/Terminated (7 inquiries): Individuals submitted inquiries regarding their eligibility due to termination or award pending status. Half of these inquiries were resolved with changes.

Award Notice Issues

One percent of the total number of submitted inquiries related to difficulty in understanding the information presented on the ASPIRE Award Notice, specifically with regard to the Strand IIIC award information. The award notice was unclear in this strand. In addition to the inquiries of this type received, the staff fielded many questions by email regarding this strand and the presentation of award information on the award notice. While this problem was noticed early on during the inquiry period, changes could not be made to the current year's award notice. Changes are currently underway for the 2009-2010 award notice.

Policy Decisions

Four percent of the total number of submitted inquiries related directly to policy decisions made either before the award period or during the inquiry period, and were of five types:

Campus Network Specialist (2 inquiries): Inquiries of this type were submitted requesting a change to ASPIRE policy for individuals of this job type. The request was to be changed to Category G, instructional support staff, because in their position, they are responsible for assisting teachers with the campus technology. These inquiries were resolved with no changes.

Literacy Coach (7 inquiries): During the 2008-2009 school year, literacy coaches were required to teach one class per day. As such, they were allowed to link the students they were instructing, and a teacher-level value-added report was created for them. Their appropriate categorization, however, was as instructional support staff (Category G), as this is the position in which they spent the majority of their day. Literacy coaches with student linkages were informed over the summer of their categorization, so as to prevent any misunderstanding at the time of award payout. Regardless of the information conveyed to them, some literacy coaches chose to submit an inquiry requesting to have their categorization changed to a core teacher. These inquiries were resolved with no changes.

Nurses (3 inquiries): Inquiries of this type were submitted requesting a change to ASPIRE policy for individuals of this job type. The request was to be changed to Category F, noncore/ancillary teachers because campus nurses must be certified, and are paid on the teacher salary schedule. These inquiries were resolved with no changes.

Reading/ELA Middle School (10 inquiries): For the 2008-2009 school year, the Award Program Advisory Committee and ASPIRE Executive Committee recommended and the Board of Education approved a change to middle school Reading/ELA teachers of 7th and 8th grade students. This change involved the use of TAKS Reading scores to be used to calculate teacher-level value-added scores for Reading/ELA, rather than Stanford scores for Language and TAKS Reading scores for Reading. The basis of this decision was that 7th and 8th grade teachers of Reading/ELA are held accountable for TAKS, not Stanford. Some middle school teachers opposed this decision. These inquries were resolved with no changes.

Registrars (2 inquiries): Registrars at high school campuses felt that they should have been awarded as Instructional Support Staff (Category G) instead of as Operational Support Staff (Category I). They did not feel it was appropriate to be awarded at the same rate as clerical and custodial staff, since they are degreed professionals who work closely with students and teachers on campus. The Board of Education decided to leave Registrars as Category I for the 2008-2009 ASPIRE Award.

Not Applicable Issues

Two percent of the total number of submitted inquiries were not applicable to the ASPIRE Award, and were of three types:

Principals submitting inquiries on behalf of staff (9 inquiries): Some principals submitted inquiries on behalf of one or more staff members on their campus. These principals were either informed of the outcome of the staff member's inquiry, or were asked to inform the staff person that s/he needed to submit their own inquiry, in their own name. These inquiries were resolved with no changes.

Not Award Related (2 inquiries): These inquiries were submitted by staff members requesting further information on ASPIRE learning paths, and had no relation to the ASPIRE Award. These inquiries were resolved with no changes.

User Withdrawn (2 inquiries): These inquiries were submitted by staff members and were withdrawn before the Research Department had reviewed them.

Comparative Results by Campus

Table 3: Campuses with 10 or More Submitted Inquiries

Campus Number	Campus Name	Region	Inquiry Type	Resolved No Changes	Resolved With Changes	Total Number of Inquiries
075	**Dowling Middle School**	**South**		**17**	**1**	**18**
			Award Calculation Question	10	0	
			Eligibility - Attendance	1	1	
			Reading/ELA Middle School Issue	6	0	
020	**Yates High School**	**Central**		**10**	**2**	**12**
			Award Calculation Question	7	0	
			Categorization	1	1	
			Eligibility	1	0	
			Subject Assignment	1	1	
187	**Kelso Elementary School**	**South**		**10**	**1**	**11**
			Attendance Hours	0	1	
			Award Calculation Question	5	0	
			Strand IIIC Writing	1	0	
			Subject Assignment	1	0	
			Value-Added Report/Low Student	3	0	
014	**Sterling High School**	**South**		**4**	**6**	**10**
			Award Calculation Question	1	0	
			Campus Assignment	0	2	
			Categorization	2	2	
			Eligibility - Attendance	1	1	
			Subject Assignment	0	1	
027	**Chavez High School**	**East**		**5**	**5**	**10**
			Categorization	0	2	
			Eligibility - Attendance	5	3	
148	**Elrod Elementary**	**West**		**9**	**1**	**10**
			Award Calculation Question	8	0	
			Eligibility - Attendance	0	1	
			Regional Campus-Based Employees	1	0	
262	**Grissom Elementary**	**South**		**10**	**0**	**10**
			1-yr vs 3-year	2	0	
			Award Calculation Question	6	0	
			Eligibility - Attendance	1	0	
			Value-Added Report/Low Student	1	0	

There were 7 campuses with ten or more formal inquiries. **Table 3** describes these 7 campuses, detailing the types of inquiries submitted and the total number of inquiries for that campus.

Dowling Middle School (South Region) had the largest number of submitted inquiries. Of the 18 inquiries submitted, ten were award calculation questions. The majority of "Reading/ELA Middle School Issue" inquiries came from this campus. There was also one Eligibility-Attendance inquiry. One of the 18 inquiries was resolved with changes.

Yates High School (Central Region) had twelve submitted inquiries. Seven of the submitted inquiries were award calculation questions, one categorization inquiry, one eligibility inquiry, and one subject assignment inquiry. Two of the 12 inquiries were resolved with changes.

Kelso Elementary School (South Region) had eleven submitted inquiries. Five of the inquiries were award calculation questions, and there were value-added report/low student number questions. One of the 11 inquiries was resolved with changes.

Comparative Results by Region

When comparing the number and type of inquiries based on the region from which they were received, no unexpected differences were found (see **Table 4**). The most significant result in comparing regions is the difference found in communication issues and award notice issues. Regarding communication issues, all regions were approximately equivalent, with the exception of the East region, which had far fewer inquiries of this type. Award notice issues showed a striking bias, with 25% of all award notice issues coming from the Central region, and 75% of all award notice issues coming from the South region. No other regions had inquiries regarding the award notice.

Table 4: Inquiry Type by Region

		Region				
	Alt/Charter/Special Education	Central	East	North	South	West
Charter Issues	60%	0%	0%	40%	0%	0%
Communication Issues	5%	22%	6%	20%	28%	20%
Value-added Issues	2%	13%	22%	13%	22%	28%
HR Issues	2%	20%	16%	23%	15%	24%
Verification/Confirmation Issues	4%	16%	12%	26%	21%	19%
Award Notice Issues	0%	25%	0%	0%	75%	0%
Policy Decisions	0%	4%	13%	17%	33%	33%
Not Applicable Issues	0%	27%	9%	27%	9%	27%

Comparative Results by School Level

When comparing the number and type of inquiries based on the campus level from which they were received, some differences are notable (see **Table 5**). Elementary schools had the highest percent of submitted inquiries (49%), while middle schools had 30% and high schools had 21%. All Charter and award notice inquiries were received from staff at elementary schools. The majority of all issues submitted were received from staff at elementary schools, with the exception of policy decisions.

Table 5: Inquiry Type by Level

	Elementary	Middle	High
Charter Issues	100%	0%	0%
Communication Issues	44%	38%	18%
Value-added Issues	61%	37%	2%
HR Issues	49%	24%	27%
Verification/Confirmation Issues	52%	25%	23%
Award Notice Issues	100%	0%	0%
Policy Decisions	13%	75%	13%
Not Applicable Issues	55%	18%	27%
Total	**49%**	**30%**	**21%**

Conclusions

There were three major types of inquiries submitted during the 2008-2009 ASPIRE Award Inquiry period. The majority were HR issues, of which the largest portion were inquiries regarding the 90% attendance requirement. This was the first year for this requirement to be in effect; as such, we anticipated the majority of inquiries to be related to this eligibility requirement. In previous years, staff did not apply for Family Medical Leave (FML) protection, but rather made accommodations at the campus level. No formal paperwork was required or provided. Since eligibility for the ASPIRE award was directly tied to staff attendance for the 2008-2009 award year, deadlines to provide documentation to support retroactive FML protection were extended multiple times to accommodate employees. Only about half of the staff who submitted an inquiry regarding their eligibility based on attendance were able to provide the necessary documentation to support an FML waiver for their absences. In addition, none of the inquiries that were submitted revealed any mis-calculation of absences or data errors that could have prevented the submission of any portion of these inquiries.

Another large portion of inquiries were questions regarding award calculation, indicating that more focus needs to be placed on the actual award model of the ASPIRE program, most significantly at the campus staff level. While campus staff are becoming more informed regarding value-added data, many still do not understand the award model or the eligibility requirements, and as such are submitting formal inquiries requesting further information, rather than actual changes to their awards. The questions presented as formal inquiries indicated a lack of familiarity with the ASPIRE portal, the award model, and a deficiency in the communication provided to campus-level staff regarding the calculation of awarded amounts. The district recently began producing and sending out the ASPIRE newsletter, which provides all staff with further information, updates, and key dates for ASPIRE-related activities, is anticipated to help further reduce the number of inquiries of this type seen in the future. The first ASPIRE newsletter was sent out in November of 2009.

Verification and confirmation issues made up another large portion of the submitted inquiries. Of these, the majority were problems regarding staff categorization. The "majority of day" rule for categorization has always been in place; however, for the 2008-2009 school year, we implemented a process to attempt to support this in data. For the 2008-2009 school year, the number of students in core

courses compared to the number of students in noncore courses was used to identify core teachers versus noncore/ancillary teachers. While it was strongly suspected that this logic would likely not be the best measure, this was our best data resource for determining majority of the day at the time. In the past several months, we have found other variables that we expect will improve this logic. Specifically, the number of course sections will be utilized for the 2009-2010 school year, rather than the number of students per course. Overall, however, based on the number of inquiries resolved with changes, we feel confident that the various processes and data quality checks put in place for the 2008-2009 award year were effective in reducing error, thereby reducing the total number of necessary inquiries.

At the conclusion of the 2007-2008 inquiry period, it was recommended that more focus be placed on the training and completion of the verification and linkage process that is done in the spring, since the thorough and accurate completion of this information is essential to the proper categorization and value-added calculation for employees. More focus was placed on the training; however, a series of alerts were provided to principals during Principal Set-up, Linkage and Verification, and the Principal Confirmation period, all of which occurred May-June of 2009. These alerts were created for principals to warn of teachers who linked students at 0% time, core teachers who did not link students, special education teachers with no subjects assigned, and a variety of other items that required direct attention and intervention. A series of data quality checks were completed over the summer months that resulted in cleaner data to be viewed by the principals during the Principal Re-confirmation period, which occurred in October of 2009. The Principal Confirmation Period was another essential part of the process, which allowed principals to view the final eligibility and categorization data for all staff at their campuses prior to the calculation of award amounts, to ensure the quality of the data to be presented. During this review, additional systematic errors were uncovered, as well as other problems that were not discovered during the verification and linkage process at the end of the school year. It is again strongly recommended that the Principal Confirmation period at the conclusion of the linkage and verification process be maintained, as well as the Principal Re-confirmation period in October of the following school year.

For the 2008-2009 award year, a series of ConnectEd calls and all-staff emails were transmitted, which significantly reduced the number of "after-the-deadline" requests for changes. All employees were infomed multiple times through multiple sources that the January 11 deadline for submission of inquiries was firm. In addition, former employees were contacted and were also given a firm deadline for the submission of an inquiry regarding their awards. The implementation of a firm deadline and multi-pronged communication effort to relay information made a significantly positive impact on the number of inquiries submitted, as well as the number of requests for changes after that deadline. Because of these changes implemented this year, very few "follow-up" payroll files have been required. The final set of inquiry follow-up payments were made on March 10, 2010, as opposed to mid-July of 2009 for the 2007-2008 school year. Overall, the inquiry period passed very smoothly with few complications.