

The 2012 Broad Prize

About the Finalist

Houston Independent School District Texas

DISTRICT PROFILE

Superintendent

Abelardo Saavedra served as superintendent of the Houston Independent School District (HISD) from December 2004 to August 2009. Previously, Saavedra was the executive director of school support services. Prior to joining HISD, he served as the superintendent of Corpus Christi Independent School District.

Terry Grier has served as superintendent of Houston Independent School District since September 2009. Grier has also served as superintendent of San Diego Unified School District and Guilford County Schools.

Governance

Nine-member school board, elected by district to serve staggered four-year terms.

Teachers Union

Texas is a non-union state.



\$1.58 billion

Annual Budget



\$8,509

Per Pupil Expenditures



7

Rank Among U.S. School Districts



203,066

Number of Students



11,428

Number of Teachers



279

Number of Schools



30%

Students Designated as English Language Learners



80%

Students Eligible for Free and Reduced-Price School Lunch



62.4%
Hispanic

25.1%
African-American

8.1%
White

3.4%
Asian/
Pacific
Islander

1.0%
Other

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

Houston's African-American graduation rate improved faster than in other urban districts nationally. The graduation rate of Houston's African-American students, as shown by the average of three nationally recognized graduation rate estimation methods, increased 13 percentage points from 2006 to 2009.

HISD increased the percentage of Hispanic and African-American students taking college-readiness exams more quickly than other urban districts nationally.

Between 2008 and 2011, SAT participation rates for HISD's Hispanic students increased by 15 percentage points.

In this same period, Advanced Placement (AP) exam participation by Hispanic students increased 13 percentage points, an average of about 4 percentage points per year—an improvement rate that ranked in the top 10 percent of all 75 Broad Prize-eligible districts.

And in 2011, the percentage of HISD's African-American students taking an AP exam—23 percent—ranked in the top 10 percent of Broad Prize-eligible districts.

Similarly, the percent of HISD's Hispanic students taking an AP exam in 2011—29 percent—ranked in the top 20 percent of eligible districts.

A greater percentage of Hispanic and low-income students reach advanced academic levels in Houston than in other urban districts in Texas. In 2011, the percentage of HISD's Hispanic students that performed at the highest achievement level (Commended) in math and science at all school levels (elementary, middle, high school) ranked in the top 30 percent statewide compared to Hispanic students in other Texas districts. In addition, the percentage of Houston's low-income students that performed at the highest achievement level in math at all school levels and in elementary and middle school science ranked in the top 30 percent statewide compared to low-income students in other Texas districts.

Houston narrowed almost all of its income achievement gaps. In recent years, Houston narrowed achievement gaps between low-income and non-low-income students in math and science at all school levels and in reading at the elementary and middle school levels.

EXEMPLARY PRACTICES RELATED TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

The district holds all schools responsible for student achievement, and bolsters struggling schools with critical supports, including top talent, more learning time and extra tutoring.

In 2010, HISD began a major new effort to turn around the district's struggling schools, adopting strategies commonly used by some of the nation's most successful urban public charter schools.

The program is called Apollo 20, after the target number of participating schools and the innovative space program that landed a man on the moon.

Apollo 20 is based on research by Harvard University's Roland Fryer, who identified key ingredients common among successful school turnaround efforts, including: effective teachers and principals, more instruction time, data-driven instruction, high-dose tutoring and a culture of high expectations for all.

Houston conducted a national recruitment campaign, offering performance bonuses to attract top teachers and principals. The district also held "commitment conversations" with every teacher to determine which ones were devoted to the Apollo 20 mission and which might do better in a different kind of school. The district also assigned 50 Teach For America corps members to the Apollo 20 schools, and attracted 40 of its own most effective teachers to the effort by offering transfer bonuses.

The school year in Apollo 20 schools is two weeks longer than in other district schools, and students are required to spend an extra hour a day in school. A brigade of 260 math fellows—college students or retired teachers recruited by the district—is also deployed to tutor every sixth- and ninth-grade Apollo student in math for an extra hour a day. Elementary schools in the program also assign reading specialists to spend extra time on reading instruction with each student every day.

The district conducted an extensive community fund-raising campaign to support the Apollo 20 effort, which showed promising results in 2010-2011, the first year of implementation. To measure the program's effectiveness, the district compared the Apollo schools to other district schools with similar demographic and socio-economic characteristics. They found that the Apollo students' math skills grew on average by more than an extra quarter of a school year (3.5 months estimated gain on top of gains students would be expected to make). Among sixth- and ninth-graders, who received the intensive math tutoring, the gains were

even more dramatic, rising on average by an additional half year to a whole year's growth. Attendance in the Apollo schools rose by 4 percent and suspensions dropped by as much as 13 percent.

The district empowers teachers and instructional staff with multiple types of ongoing differentiated professional development designed to meet student achievement goals.

HISD provides extensive professional development opportunities to its employees through courses that address both academic content and teaching techniques, and through professional learning communities—teams of teachers who meet regularly to collaborate and brainstorm about educational strategies.

Campus-based professional development is planned by school staff, often with the help of school improvement officers—former principals who provide consultation and coaching at schools across the district. At the direction of the school board, professional learning communities have been implemented at all schools in the district, and the district hired experts to advise staff about the most effective way to establish them.

HISD differentiates its professional development by teacher experience levels, content areas, school needs and individual teacher needs. The department's training catalogue offers four levels of courses, coded by teachers' capabilities, from novice to highly effective. Coaches and mentors help new or struggling teachers select the courses best suited to their needs. Schools use assessment data to determine the content of campus-wide professional development. The district uses classroom walkthroughs to observe whether a teacher has selected appropriate instructional strategies. The observer and the teacher then discuss the choices he or she has made, and how to improve their effectiveness.

HISD's coaches and mentors meet regularly to discuss the district's strategies for effective coaching and mentoring. The district has a wide array of specialists to offer assistance to individual teachers and schools, including regional instructional coordinators and content specialists, elementary and secondary literacy coaches, numeracy specialists, and English as a Second Language academic coaches. The coaches and mentors offer support to individual teachers upon request, and to teams of teachers during their professional learning community sessions.

Beginning in the 2007-08 school year, full-time mentors were assigned to all first- and second-year teachers at campuses with

low academic performance or high teacher turnover. Each mentor worked with about 25 teachers, modeling best practices and co-teaching. They also helped with lesson planning and classroom management. In 2010, the full-time mentors were replaced by campus mentors—experienced teachers at each school—who provide support to first- or second-year teachers in addition to their regular teaching duties. The campus-based mentors observe beginning teachers six times a year and meet with them to discuss strategies and techniques.

The district has taken aggressive steps to help students graduate on time and offers an array of programs to keep them on track toward a diploma.

Increasing the graduation rate is a top priority for HISD, which has set up dropout recovery, intervention and prevention committees in every middle and high school. These teams of principals, teachers, counselors and police officers work together to identify at-risk students as early as possible and help them develop personalized graduation plans. Starting in the sixth grade, students meet with counselors to review the plans.

The district has also introduced “grad labs” to help struggling students recover course credits by completing online courses under the guidance of a graduation coach. Between 4,000 and 13,000 students enroll in the grad labs each year, and 80 percent pass the courses in which they enroll. HISD has also deployed 10 full-time dropout prevention specialists to recommend student interventions as needed and ensure that students entering high school are prepared to meet graduation requirements. In addition, HISD offers summer programs, programs for immigrant students, tutoring and alternative schools. For students in need of mental health counseling or other social services, the district works with community partners to address student needs.

District leaders have worked to create a district-wide culture that is focused on achieving results, continuously improving and providing students with equal opportunities to learn.

District leadership has made it a priority to increase the pace of reform in order to provide equal learning opportunities for all students.

To achieve this, among other things, district leaders have recruited administrators and principals with strong track records of success in closing achievement gaps in other school districts. They have also prioritized initiatives likely to contribute to student gains, such as: raising the level of rigor across the district, raising the performance of the district’s

lowest-performing schools (such as the Apollo 20), and emphasizing effective teaching and principalships.

For example, Houston has dramatically increased the number of Advanced Placement offerings at high schools across the district, now requiring 15 AP courses per school. As a result, far more students are taking AP exams and scoring a 3 or higher.

The district comprehensively cultivates and places highly effective staff in leadership roles.

HISD has offered a wide array of training opportunities to help employees move up the ranks and become effective leaders. As a result of these efforts, the district doubled the number of internal candidates promoted to principal or central office positions between 2007 and 2011.

In 2007-08, HISD implemented a 14-month aspiring principal institute, which prepared a high-quality cadre of aspiring leaders to address challenges associated with inner-city schools, such as working with English-language learners and economically disadvantaged students who start school with limited exposure to reading and writing. Participants attended classes for 2.5 hours a week and completed coursework on various leadership issues.

In 2010, the district launched two new leadership recruitment and preparation efforts designed to create an internal pipeline of leadership candidates: a “school leadership academy for aspiring instructional leaders,” and a “principal academy for collaborative engagement” for staff pursuing principal certification.

The school leadership academy is a year-long program that features case studies, performance simulations, Socratic-style seminars, performance screenings and three weeks of summer field experience. The academy’s curriculum covers change management, curriculum and instruction, assessment and operations and facilities management. Participants in the principal leadership academy for collaborative engagement must apply for admission to the rigorous 18-month academic program, which is a partnership between the district and the St. Thomas School of Education and School of Business. ■



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