

Celebrating America's Most Improved Public School Districts

The 2012 **Broad Prize**



The **Broad Prize** for Urban Education

75

School Districts

review board narrows the field to four finalists. A team of education researchers then visits each district. A jury of national leaders from education,

The Broad Prize for Urban Education starts with the 75 largest urban districts in America that serve mostly high-minority, high-poverty students. After an exhaustive review of student achievement and college readiness data, an independent



sculpture © Tom Otterness, 2002

4

Finalists

scholarships divided among the winner and finalists, The Broad Prize recognizes the true heroes in every urban school system in America: our students.

business and public service pores over the student achievement data and site visit observations and evaluations. They choose the district that represents the country's most improved urban school system. The winning district is held up as a national example of hope and inspiration for others around the country that are seeking to propel their students to higher levels of academic achievement and to successful careers in college and beyond. With \$1 million in college

1

Winner

www.broadprize.org

The **Broad Prize** Finalists



Miami-Dade County
Public Schools
Florida
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Corona-Norco Unified
School District
California
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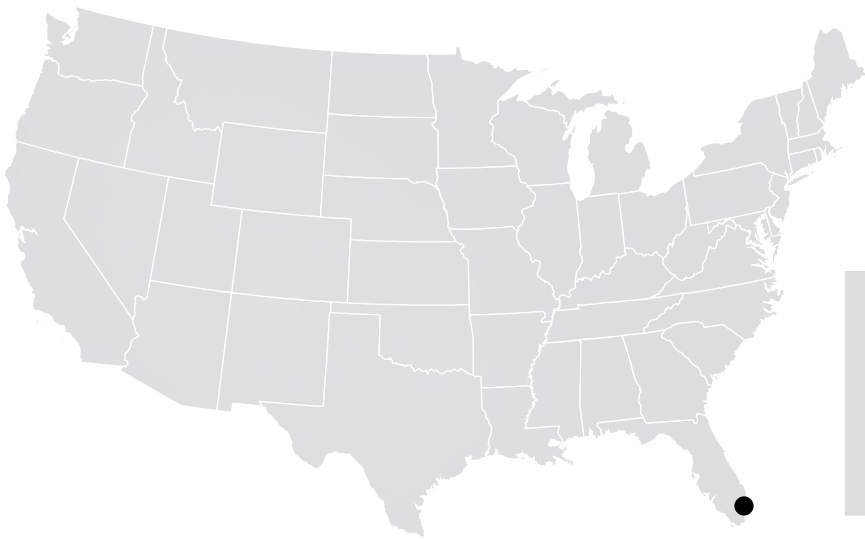
Houston Independent
School District
Texas
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The School District
of Palm Beach County
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2012 Winner

Miami-Dade County Public Schools
Florida



DISTRICT PROFILE



\$4.3 billion
Annual Budget



21,646
Number of Teachers



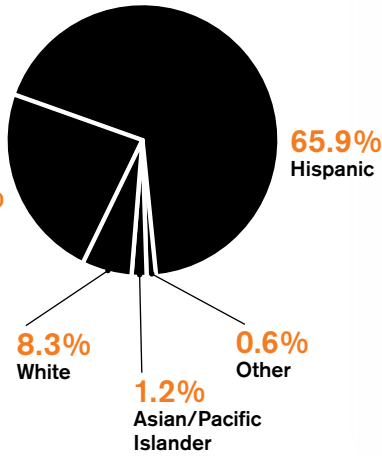
74%
Students Eligible for Free and
Reduced-Price School Lunch



4
Rank Among U.S. School Districts



435
Number of Schools



349,664
Number of Students



21%
Students Designated as
English Language Learners

(reflects 2011/12 school year data)



Last year, when the bank foreclosed on his family’s house, 18-year-old Dagoberto immersed himself in his second home: the engineering classroom at Miami Central High School. He spent hours designing a balsa wood race car that hit 49 miles per hour and took home a slew of blue ribbons at a state science fair.

His passion for science was a welcome escape when he and his family, six in all, moved into a storage room at his aunt’s house. In such cramped quarters, arguments were frequent and sleep was hard to come by. To help with expenses, Dagoberto sold the second-hand car he had bought with a \$1,000 science prize and took an after-school job.

Through it all, he not only kept up with his Advanced Placement (AP) classes, but pulled straight A’s. He graduated last spring with a \$30,000 scholarship and plans to enroll at Penn State.

“He’s the kind of person who just tries and tries and tries,” says Frank Houghtaling, the engineering teacher at Central. “No matter what life throws at him, he doesn’t give up.”

The same might be said of Miami-Dade County Public Schools, which has sustained academic excellence in the face of the severe economic challenges that have disrupted school districts across the nation. (The district’s budget shrunk by 10 percent, or \$250 million, from 2008 to 2011.)

A five-time Broad Prize finalist, Miami-Dade has more than 349,000 students, nearly 22,000 teachers and 435 schools.

Ninety-one percent of the students are minority, and nearly three-quarters live in poverty. Twenty percent are still learning English. Yet the performance of the district’s black and Hispanic students stands out when compared to those in similar districts across the state and nation.

The percentage of Miami-Dade students who took the ACT

exam grew faster than most of their counterparts in urban districts nationally from 2008 to 2011. Graduation rates for black and Hispanic students rose by 14 percentage points. In 2011, Miami-Dade students at all grade levels outperformed students from similar districts across Florida in math, reading and science.

Under the leadership of a strong superintendent, the district has achieved these results by offering a wide array of school-choice options, listening carefully to community concerns, and maintaining a strong commitment to data-based decision-making. It has also provided extra resources to its lowest-performing schools in an effort to turn them around.

**STUDENT
ACHIEVEMENT:
THE DISTRICT
MANTRA**

As Dagoberto’s story attests, Miami-Dade has also placed a singular focus on student achievement. From the top down, everyone across the district is focused on doing whatever it takes to help students succeed, no matter how great the obstacles.

When he heard about Dagoberto’s struggles at home, Houghtaling, the engineering teacher, did everything he could to help. He found odd jobs for Dagoberto, connected the family to counseling services and food banks, and even invited the entire family of six to his house for Thanksgiving.

“After my parents lost their jobs and their home in the downturn, we were having a very difficult time,” Dagoberto says. “When Mr. Houghtaling invited us for Thanksgiving, my mom started crying.”

**A STRONG
SUPERINTENDENT**

This focus on the “whole child” is a priority of the district’s dynamic superintendent, Alberto Carvalho, who has turned the phrase “student achievement” into the district mantra. At the age of 17, Carvalho ventured off by himself to the United States from Portugal. He has lived the classic immigrant story, rising from jobs as a day laborer and kitchen prep worker to become superintendent of the nation’s fourth-largest school district. Along the way, he worked as a teacher and principal and served as the district’s communications director and legislative liaison.

When he took over the district in 2008, Carvalho inherited a budgetary mess. The district was on the verge of a \$100 million shortfall, and the state was threatening to take



over. Since then, Miami-Dade has cut central office spending in half, renegotiated textbook contracts and created its own health insurance program for teachers and staff. Although personnel costs are the largest line item in the budget, the district has avoided laying off teachers, yet has increased its reserves from \$5.9 million to \$160.6 million.

A COMMITMENT TO CHOICE

With its balance sheet transformed, the district has managed to fend off cuts that would harm students, and it has continued to expand its impressive choice offerings, which Carvalho considers a key to the district's success. Miami-Dade offers 360 magnet programs as well as district-run charter schools and career academies. Last year, 46 percent of the students in the district participated in a choice program.

An engineering magnet is being developed at Miami Central High, a school once notorious for violence and mayhem that has improved its state rating from an F to a C. In 2011, President Obama visited Central to salute the school's efforts, and he came to Mr. Houghtaling's class, where Dagoberto designed his speedy car.

In Miami-Dade, teachers are offered a \$3,000 bonus to work in under-achieving schools like Central, and new talent has been brought in to transform a legacy of neglect into a culture of achievement. At Central and other high schools across the district, AP offerings have been expanded, and enrollment in these classes has boomed. Between 2007-08 and 2010-11, the number of Miami-Dade students enrolled in AP classes rose by 36 percent, and the percentage of students scoring a 3, 4 or 5 on AP tests increased by 34 percent.



to keep the older students in separate wings and seat them separately in the cafeteria. Older students use one stairway, younger pupils use another.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

One key to the district's success, Carvalho says, is its commitment to a "demand-driven reform strategy." This means winning the community's support for major district initiatives—and paying close attention to the desires of various stakeholders. "A lot of times, parents and students are left out of the conversation," Carvalho says. "In Miami-Dade, we actually listen to their voices."

Carvalho holds town hall meetings, editorial board sessions with Spanish- and English-language media, and "coffee conversations" with parents around the district. He has used such forums to talk up efforts to make every school wireless, launch an innovative "I-Tech Academy," and make the Miami-Dade school bus fleet fully equipped with seat belts and air conditioning, while lessening its carbon footprint. He also used them to talk up the benefits of K-8 schools.

"I have aggressively stoked the conversation around choice, and K-8 expansion has always been a very robust pillar in that conversation," he says. "But I didn't really need to stoke it. Every community wants K-8 centers in their neighborhood."

In addition to the 39 centers already in operation, the district plans to open five more in the coming school year.

DATA-DRIVEN DECISION-MAKING

Before committing to that plan, however, Miami-Dade did what it always does before making a strategic decision—it took a close look at the numbers. District leaders studied five years' worth of data comparing the academic performance of ninth-grade students who attended middle school with those who attended K-8 centers. Controlling for race, poverty and other factors, it found that students from the K-8's did better on math and science assessments. "They have higher self-esteem, fewer disciplinary infractions and a



more positive overall attitude toward school," Carvalho says.

Teachers and administrators in Miami-Dade frequently pore over data and discuss ways to improve the numbers.

Administrators have data chats with teachers, and teachers have data chats with students so that everyone has a clear idea of challenges and objectives. Every school has a "data wall" illustrating its performance as measured by various assessment metrics.

Three or four times a year, whenever the new formative or interim assessment data comes out, principals at the district's lowest-performing schools must gather around a long meeting table with Carvalho and his cabinet to analyze the scores. The process is known as a Data/COM, and it can be rather daunting for whoever is on the hot seat trying to explain the numbers. The idea is not to scold but to find areas for improvement and help realign resources as necessary. If the numbers show a teacher needs help teaching a certain subject, a coach is sent in to help. If a school needs more textbooks or software, Carvalho sends it. Immediately.

"If I'm told about a problem on a Friday," he says, "I want it solved by Monday morning."

The Data/COM meetings keep principals on their toes, says Rennina Turner, former principal at Miami Central. "It forces us to know about every aspect of our school," she says. "At no point would I want to go before the superintendent and say, 'I don't know.'"

A SPECIAL FOCUS ON TURNAROUND SCHOOLS

Miami-Dade has made a determined effort to turn around low-achieving schools that had been tagged with an "F" grade by the state. These 19 schools were grouped under the district's Education Transformation Office (ETO), which provides them with extra resources such as reading, science and math coaches. Teachers at these schools were also required to set aside 90 minutes of common planning time. The superintendent appointed new principals to the ETO schools, many of which have also hired a large number of recruits from Teach For America (TFA), a program that gives outstanding college graduates the opportunity to teach in inner-city schools.

The results have been impressive. In 2009, 12 of the original 19 ETO schools had received a D or an F grade from the state. None had received an A or a B. By 2011, the group included five A's, two B's and just four at a D or F. In the same timeframe, the ETO schools improved their scores on the state's proficiency exams by 32 percentage points in math, 25 points in science and 7 points in reading.

One of the ETO schools is Holmes Elementary, located in the rough-and-tumble inner city neighborhood of Liberty City. It has boosted its state rating from an F to a C. The school's former principal, Atunya Walker, hired 12 TFA corps members to teach at the school and promoted one to assistant principal. The math and science coaches at the school are also from TFA, whose recruits often come from neighborhoods like Liberty City and want to return to give something back to the community.

"They have a way of making students become invested in learning," Walker says. "They hold students accountable, but they also have heart."

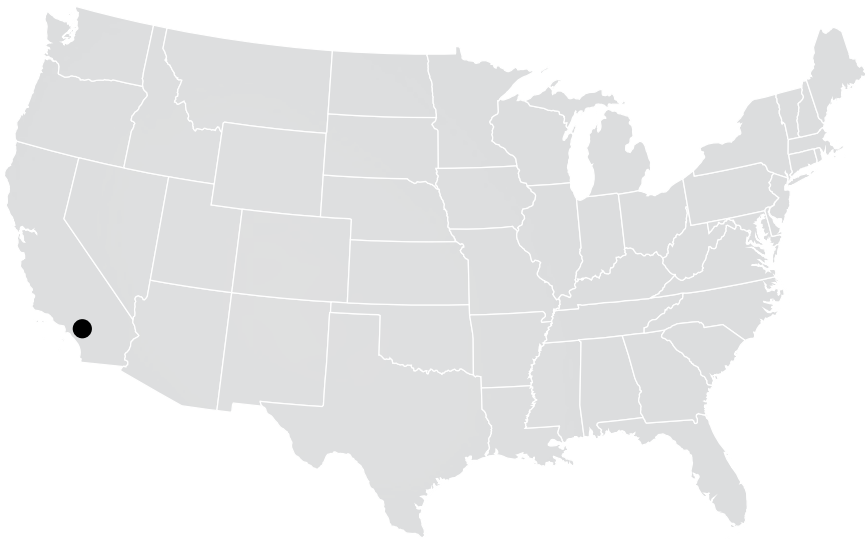
Among them is Manoach Lamarre, a second-grade teacher who grew up in the nearby Little Haiti neighborhood, where the sound of gunshots was a regular feature of his childhood. "If the kids tell me I don't know how hard it is out there, I can tell them that I do know," Lamarre says.

That has made a big difference with a student named Amari, with whom he has formed a close bond. Lamarre taught Amari in both first and second grade. He started out far below grade level in reading, but left a half-year ahead, rising from a 3 on the district's assessment scale to a 36. (Ten points constitutes a year's worth of progress.)

Like teachers across Miami-Dade, Lamarre has encouraged students to use data to chart their progress. Amari has taken the lesson to heart, offering his own metric with a broad smile. "I could only recognize 16 words when I started," he says. "Now I know 600." ■



Corona-Norco Unified School District
California



DISTRICT PROFILE



\$383.2 million
Annual Budget



2,353
Number of Teachers



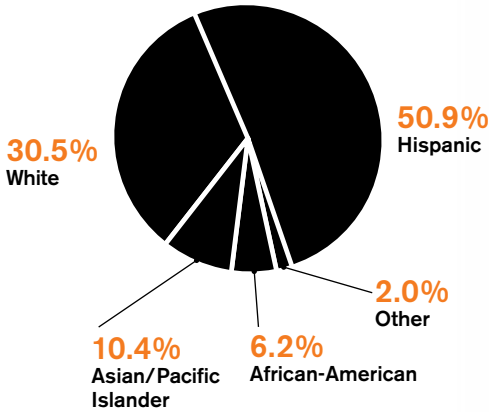
43%
Students Eligible for Free and
Reduced-Price School Lunch



81
Rank Among U.S. School Districts



49
Number of Schools



53,424
Number of Students



14%
Students Designated as
English Language Learners

(reflects 2011/12 school year data)



At the end of an exhaustive search for a new leader at Norco High School, Superintendent Kent Bechler found just what he was looking for: a principal with a horse. It wasn't the animal itself that mattered, of course, but the fact that its owner would understand the culture in Norco, also known as "Horse Town USA."

Bechler places a premium on finding a good fit between principal and school—and making sure that various stakeholders in the Corona-Norco Unified School District have a chance to weigh in. He has shunned a top-down management style and reached out to principals, teachers and parents.

He believes this collaborative culture—and a "Kids First" philosophy—has helped lift academic performance and narrow the achievement gap between Corona-Norco Unified's minority and white students over the last several years.

African-American students at all school levels made greater gains than their white peers in reading and science, and in high school math. Meanwhile, Hispanic students narrowed the gap in science at all levels, and in elementary and high school reading and math, making the district a first-time Broad Prize finalist.

California's 10th-largest district, Corona-Norco has 49 schools, more than 2,000 teachers and 53,424 students, of whom 69 percent are minority and 43 percent are low-income. The district is located in a swath of western Riverside

County that serves as a transportation hub, with vast warehouses storing goods for truckers ferrying up and down California highways. Once home to citrus farms, it has become a bedroom community, with many residents making the arduous 45-mile commute to Los Angeles each day.

To achieve its success, Corona-Norco has worked hard to

implement the collaborative culture prized by Bechler. The district has embraced instructional strategies aimed at lifting rigor and engagement, provided extensive training opportunities for teachers and administrators, and engaged parents as meaningful partners in the educational mission.

The district's efforts have been buoyed by the willingness of teachers to rally behind Bechler's "Kid's First" approach. With looming budget cuts threatening the district, teachers took the extraordinary step of accepting a nearly 5 percent pay cut to protect programs that help children.

A TEAM-ORIENTED APPROACH

Bechler believes finding the right match between principal and school is a key to making teamwork flourish. His approach was on clear display during the search for a principal at Norco High, located in the far northeast corner of the district, where horses outnumber people and local businesses have hitching posts outside their front doors. Like many residents, Norco principal Lisa Simon often rides her horse around town, which has horse trails instead of sidewalks.

Superintendent Bechler knew he wanted a principal willing to challenge the status quo. "I didn't think the expectations at Norco were high enough," he says. "I didn't think that the rigor was there or that student engagement was where it should be."

An inside candidate wanted the job, but Bechler had his eyes on Simon, who was serving as a middle school principal at the time and wasn't on anyone's radar for the Norco job.

But before making a decision, he wanted to get buy-in from the staff. He came to the school and handed out questionnaires asking the teachers about their leadership priorities. He encouraged them to be honest about the school's strengths and weaknesses. And he listened when they told him they needed a good communicator.



Michelle Choi, a language arts teacher, said the staff was impressed that Bechler and his second-in-command came to the school to get the staff's input. "They wanted to know what we were looking for in a leader—and what we weren't looking for."

Another example of Corona-Norco's collaborative approach is on display each week at schools across the district, where teachers have an hour built into the weekly schedule for "Professional Teacher Time"—an opportunity to brainstorm about instructional strategies. This commitment required negotiating with unions to change school hours and the entire district transportation schedule.

During a recent session at Parkridge Elementary School, four third-grade teachers pored over data and discussed ways to improve their students' performance on reading assessments. "We use the numbers to decide how much time to devote to a given skill," says teacher Debra Collins. "And if we find students who are struggling with the same issues, we pull them from the different third-grade classes and teach them together."

At first, the teachers found the sessions a bit daunting. It could be embarrassing if their class bombed on a particular assessment. "We're allowing ourselves to be vulnerable," says Teresa Alfel, sitting around a classroom table with her colleagues perched on tiny chairs. "If we have a weakness, we have to ask, 'What did I do wrong?'"

Over time, they put their insecurities aside and came to view themselves as a team. "We all bring our ideas to the table and mesh them," says teacher Patty Elvalle. "The end result is much better than anything we could do alone."

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT WITH A FOCUS ON RIGOR AND ENGAGEMENT

From top to bottom, the district places a high priority on professional development. Each year, the district sends principals and administrators to attend training at the Army War College that features a trip to Gettysburg. During visits to the famous battlefield, they reflect on leadership and strategic thinking. Teachers across the

district must complete 30 hours of professional development training each year, and much of it is focused on techniques aimed at increasing rigor and engagement.

Some material is tailored to the needs of individual schools, but everyone studies a concept known as the Engagement Cube. Developed by the educator John Antonetti, the cube integrates Marzano's high-yield instructional strategies, Bloom's Taxonomy and Schlechty's engaging qualities of student work.

The ideas represented in the cube are intended to inspire students to become active participants in their own learning and encourage teachers to shun lectures and other strategies that often make students tune out. Applying the Cube to a vocabulary lesson, for example, a teacher would forsake the usual strategy of giving students a list of definitions to memorize. Instead, he might offer four different pictures illustrating the definition—and invite students to describe the pictures' common elements, refining their ideas until they come upon the definition.

Allowing students to bring their own ideas to a lesson makes them more invested in it, says Colleen Hawkins, the district's director of education services. "People are more likely to be interested in something if it has a personal dimension."

The district's efforts to engage students appear to be working, with particularly striking results for minority students. Compared with their peers across the state, a greater percentage of Hispanic and African-American students in Corona-Norco are reaching the highest academic levels. In 2011, the percentage of Corona-Norco's Hispanic elementary students performing at the advanced achievement level in reading, math and science ranked in the top 30 percent statewide compared to other Hispanic students. The percentage of African-American elementary and middle school students performing at the advanced level in reading and math ranked in the top 10 percent compared with African-American students statewide. In science, the scores of African-Americans placed them in the top 20 percent.





A FOCUS ON MEANINGFUL PARENT INVOLVEMENT

Corona-Norco has made great efforts to engage not just students, but also parents, including recent Spanish-speaking immigrants who might not have finished high school and are reluctant to get involved in school affairs. District leaders believed that closing the achievement gap required parents from all backgrounds to support their children's learning. To this end, district schools have opened Parents Universities such as the one at Home Gardens Academy, where 93 percent of the students are Hispanic, and roughly 70 percent are English-language learners.

Until recently an elementary school, Home Gardens is making the transition to a K-8 campus. When she took over, Principal Cassandra Willis observed that expectations for students were very low. The assumption was that most would not attend college, and few would even graduate. The mission of the Parents University was to raise expectations and end generational poverty by educating the parents whose children were attending Home Gardens. "It's had a 'wow' effect," Willis said. "When I started here, we had 50 percent participation in parent-teacher conferences. Now we're at over 95 percent."

Parents University offers 30 classes a year in everything from English to combating gang violence. One popular offering is How to Get Your Kid into College. Parents University offered a second chance to Adriana Gonzalez, a parent with two children at Home Gardens. To help out her own parents, she had left school after 10th grade to take a job at Burger King. Her experience at Parents University has inspired her to get her GED and go to college. "Everywhere you look around here, there's something about college," she says. "I thought it was too late for me but, no, it's not."

Principal Willis works to instill a college-bound attitude in her elementary students from the moment they walk through the door. The walls are plastered with college banners, and students take regular field trips to California universities. The same "college-or-bust" attitude prevails across the district, where the percentage of students participating in college readiness exams is increasing faster than in urban districts nationwide—and with rising scores.

Between 2008 and 2011, Corona-Norco students, particularly African-American and Hispanic students, increased their participation rates on the SAT, ACT and Advanced Placement exams. At the same time, African-

American students raised their ACT scores by 2 points, and Hispanic students saw their SAT scores rise by 14 points.

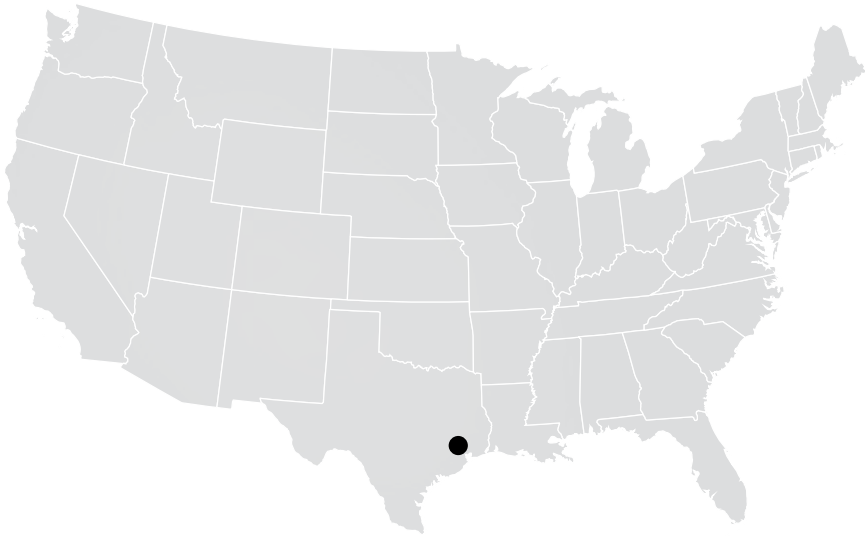
The dedication that brought about that achievement is on display during a meeting of the Black Student Union (BSU) at Santiago High School, one of the district's five comprehensive high schools. A group of students huddles in a classroom after school, where honors students tutor their peers. One math student is finding the value of a secant. Another is studying Spanish. A third is analyzing a poem by Countee Cullen, a leading figure in the Harlem Renaissance.

"We're like a little family," says Saraiyah, the BSU president. "I wouldn't let my sister walk around with bad grades. It's the same with us."

That's the very sense of camaraderie that Superintendent Bechler has worked to instill in the entire district. ■



Houston Independent School District
Texas



DISTRICT PROFILE



\$1.58 billion
Annual Budget



11,428
Number of Teachers



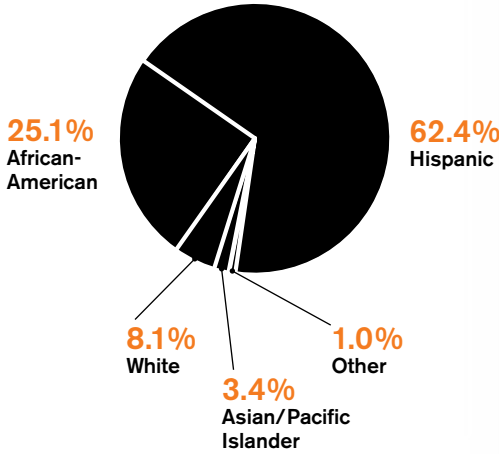
80%
Students Eligible for Free and
Reduced-Price School Lunch



7
Rank Among U.S. School Districts



279
Number of Schools



203,066
Number of Students



30%
Students Designated as
English Language Learners

(reflects 2011/12 school year data)



On her first day as principal at E.L. Furr High School in Houston—a job Bertie Simmons accepted after five peaceful years of retirement—one of her students threw a class-mate through a plate glass window. As blood spurted from the student’s neck, Simmons asked herself a reasonable question: “What do I think I’m doing? I’ve got to be a fool to be here at my age.”

Twelve years later, at the age of 78, she’s still on the job—and enjoying great success. She has created a culture of high expectations at Furr High School, which had previously been dismissed as a “dropout factory.” She has made a point of listening to students and going out of her way to show that she cares about their success. When one boy who had been performing well started piling up absences, she went to his house to find out what was wrong. It turned out his father had died.

When she first knocked on the door, nobody answered. She knocked some more. The student finally opened it, then slammed it in her face. Simmons kept talking to him through the door, offering condolences but telling him how important it was to come back to school. Finally, he came outside. “He started crying and told me he didn’t think anybody cared this much about whether he graduated,” Simmons says.

The graduation rate at Furr has more than doubled since Simmons arrived in 2000, and the school has seen a seven-fold increase in the number of students taking Advanced

Placement (AP) classes over the last two years. Furr offers a dramatic example of changes that have been taking place across the Houston Independent School District (HISD), the nation’s seventh-largest district with more than 200,000 students, 11,428 teachers and 279 schools. Ninety-two percent of the students are non-white, and 80 percent are low-income.

District-wide, African-American graduation rates rose by 13 percentage points between 2006 and 2009, outpacing similar gains in other districts across the nation. And the district narrowed nearly all of its achievement gaps between low-income students and their more affluent counterparts throughout the state. Those achievements earned Houston a return to The Broad Prize finalist circle after winning the inaugural award in 2002.

HISD has adopted a number of strategies for lifting student achievement. It has vastly expanded AP offerings for high school students. It has made an intensive effort to help students in its lowest-performing schools by implementing techniques that are proven to drive achievement in the nation’s top charter schools—longer school days and “high-dose” tutoring in math. The district closely monitors data to find the strengths and weaknesses of students and uses the numbers to hone teaching strategies. HISD has also strengthened its recruiting efforts, seeking out the very best teachers and principals—educators like Simmons with a passion for education and a determination to transform an atmosphere of academic failure into a culture of college-bound success.

A DRAMATIC COMMITMENT TO ADVANCED PLACEMENT

Districts across the nation are seeking ways to increase rigor and engagement. To this end, Superintendent Terry Grier, has required all schools

in the district—even the lowest-performing schools—to dramatically increase their AP offerings. He made the decision shortly after taking over HISD in 2009 and listening to the concerns of students. Many in low-income schools wondered why they had to attend affluent schools in far-flung neighborhoods if they wanted to take high-level classes. Grier then studied the numbers and saw that many of the district’s low-performing schools offered few, if any, AP classes.

Starting in 2010, he ordered all high schools in the district to offer at least 10 AP classes. The following year, he bumped the number up to 15. “All of our children, regardless of their ZIP code, deserve a quality education and rigorous academic preparation,” he says.

At E.L. Furr, the number of AP courses has jumped from three to 17, and the number of students enrolled in them has risen from 49 to 389. Implementing such an abrupt shift in academic expectations hasn’t been easy. Principal Simmons decided to dive right in, enrolling students directly in AP courses even though their prior academic performance





would ordinarily have placed them in a mid-level class.

“This is the hardest job I’ve ever had, but I welcome the challenge,” says Brad Pearl, who teaches four AP social

studies classes at Furr. “What we’re trying to do here is instill the will to succeed. It requires a teacher who can get the kids to believe in themselves.”

Most of the kids in his AP classes never would have enrolled on their own, Pearl says. Many came from homes and neighborhoods with social and economic challenges that made hunkering down with a book at night difficult. So Pearl took extra steps to help them. He did less lecturing and gave students more time to do their homework in class. He offered Saturday tutoring. And he spent a lot of time contacting parents, encouraging them to encourage their children.

Overall, AP scores have risen across HISD even as the district has dramatically increased its AP offerings and enrollment. Twenty-three percent of African-American students took an AP exam last year, placing HISD in the top 10 percent of the 75 districts eligible for The Broad Prize. Twenty-nine percent of Hispanic students took AP exams, placing them in the top 20 percent of prize-eligible districts.

To get students excited about rising to the AP challenge, the district has undertaken various initiatives. For her part, Simmons donned an Advanced Placement T-shirt and a hula skirt and danced around the halls, extolling the virtues of AP. Grier launched a “Cool to be Smart” campaign that culminated with a celebration for all students who took five AP classes. The event featured a raffle with a tantalizing grand prize: a new Dodge Caliber, donated by a local car dealer.

Ray, a graduating senior who took two AP classes this year, appreciates the fact that the school sets high expectations. “Everyone here encourages me and drives me,” says Ray, who came to the United States from Tampico, Mexico, when he was in elementary school. A computer whiz with a knack for engineering, Ray is working on software he hopes will allow people to build cars with easily interchangeable parts, enabling them to change the look of their vehicle as easily as they might change their jacket. He will be attending Texas A&M in the fall.

Overall, HISD’s Hispanic and low-income students have been more successful than their peers across the state. A greater percentage of both groups reached advanced academic levels in Houston than in other urban districts in Texas. At all school levels, the percentage of HISD’s Hispanic students that performed at the highest achievement level in math and science ranked in the top 30 percent statewide. Low-income students at all grade levels matched that performance in math, as did low-income students in elementary and middle school science.

APOLLO 20

The district has made a special effort to boost academic performance through a program dubbed Apollo 20, after the number of participating schools and the space program that put a man on the moon. The effort, inspired by the nation’s most successful charter schools, has been supported by \$17 million in funding from local corporations and other private donors. When the program started two years ago, the 20 Apollo schools—serving 13,563 students (89 percent low-income and 98 percent non-white)—were among the lowest-performing in the district.

The plan? Increase instructional time, adopt a data-driven approach to teaching and learning, and offer intensive small-group tutoring. The results? They have been fast and dramatic.

The percentage of Apollo 20 ninth-graders passing the statewide math assessment exam increased by 16 points last year, compared with a 2 percent increase district-wide. Apollo students made math gains equal to about three and a half months of additional learning.

The school year at the Apollo 20 has been lengthened by two weeks, and students spend an extra hour a day at school Mondays through Thursdays. Apollo sixth- and ninth-graders receive a double-dose of math, spending an hour a day with a tutor who works with just two students at a time. Among the 230 “Math Fellows,” as the tutors are known, is Nick Wilkinson, a recent college graduate from North Carolina.

“Every one of the fellows absolutely loves their job,” says Wilkinson, who teaches at Sharpstown



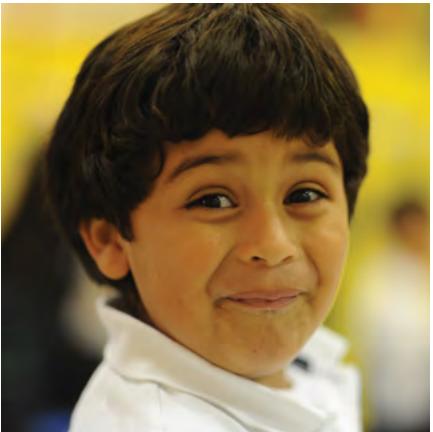
High School. “We love being able to build relationships with each and every one of our students. Algebra I teachers have 150 students a day. I see 12.”

Wilkinson can look over his students’ shoulders as they do their work. “As soon as they make a mistake, I can zoom in and correct it.”

DATA-DRIVEN INSTRUCTION

Like staffers at schools across the district, Wilkinson pays close attention to computer data measuring the performance of his students—a high priority for HISD. And Sharpstown’s computer maven, Brandi Brevard, keeps him armed with the latest numbers, providing printouts that show where his students stumbled on the state assessments. The color-coded printouts allow a teacher to quickly hone in on trouble spots, which are highlighted in red.

Brevard is the keeper of Sharpstown’s “Data War Room,” an information vault where the walls are covered with brightly colored charts and graphs monitoring the performance of every classroom, grade, student and teacher in the school. On one wall, the charts document a key piece of information: where each student stood academically when they entered their class. “The important part of looking at data is knowing where the students started,” Brevard says. “This sets the expectations



for all the data to come.” With a quick look around the room, teachers can see how their students are doing compared to one another, their grade-level peers and schools elsewhere in the district.

Data is also used to identify students at risk of flunking out—and to make sure they receive assistance at the graduation labs that have been established at every HISD high school. The labs offer tutoring to struggling students and give them the opportunity to complete courses online.

RECRUITING AND REWARDING STANDOUT PERFORMERS

HISD has made a strong push to ensure that each school has an outstanding principal, and each classroom an outstanding teacher. It has analyzed its

teacher pool to see which colleges and universities produce the strongest performers—and then made heightened efforts to continue recruiting from those schools. While teachers are promoted from within, the district also conducts broad national searches. All recruits must teach a demonstration class before signing a contract.



The point is to find talent like Chavis Mitchell, a fourth-grade teacher at Osborne Elementary School, which has received an “exemplary” designation from the state for the last four years. When teachers like Mitchell bring out the best results from their students, the district rewards them. Last year, HISD handed out \$35 million in merit pay bonuses to staffers across the district, including Mitchell, one of four teachers to receive the top payout of \$10,300. (The awards are based on how much students’ test scores improve over the course of the year, with extra weight given to students who began in the bottom 25 percent of their class.)

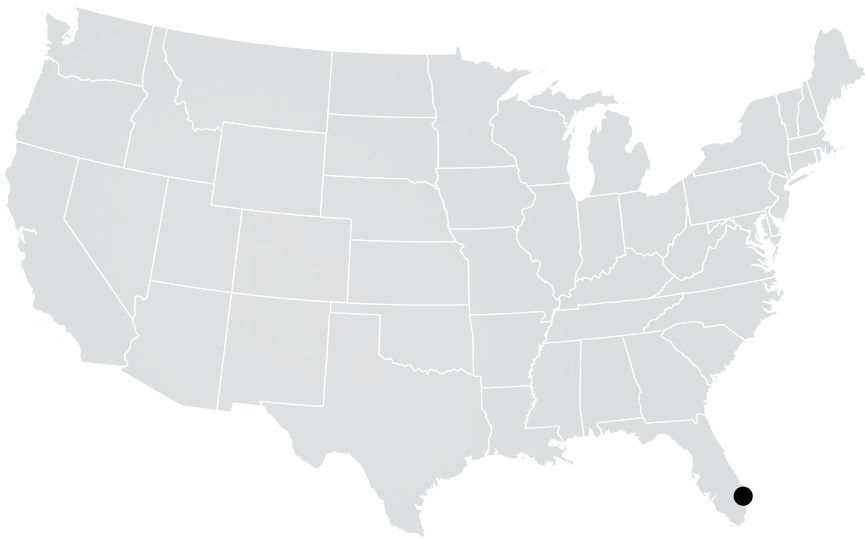
Mitchell’s specialty is teaching students to write—and making them love it. A couple times a year, he and his students hold funerals for boring words. Everyone dresses in black, and Mitchell presides, reading eulogies for “dead” words such as “sad” and “mad.” He encourages his students to replace them with more interesting “dollar” words, such as “blue” and “furious.”

On a recent day, all eyes are on Mitchell as he gives his students some writing advice. “We want a strong beginning to our stories so we can make them pop,” Mitchell says. A boy named Caleb, wearing a suit complete with vest and tie, volunteers an example: “He ran as fast as a lightning bolt to his school bus!”

Mitchell praises him, encouraging the class to start their stories “on the right foot, with a right hook.”

That pithy phrase might make an apt slogan for the entire district, which is moving aggressively to improve student achievement for all. ■

The School District of Palm Beach County
Florida



DISTRICT PROFILE



\$2.3 billion
Annual Budget



12,480
Number of Teachers



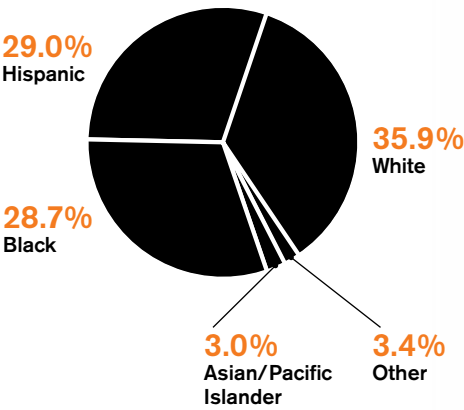
55%
Students Eligible for Free and
Reduced-Price School Lunch



11
Rank Among U.S. School Districts



228
Number of Schools



174,004
Number of Students



14%
Students Designated as
English Language Learners

(reflects 2011/12 school year data)



The sprawling School District of Palm Beach County spreads across a territory as big as Rhode Island and Delaware combined and brings together students from some of the nation’s wealthiest—and poorest—neighborhoods.

On the district’s eastern edge stands Palm Beach Island, America’s most expensive stretch of shopping after Rodeo Drive in Beverly Hills. Home to the legendary Breakers Hotel, this Palm Beach has served as a sunny playground for Donald Trump, E.F. Hutton, Rod Stewart and the Kennedy family. On the district’s far western edge stands a vast expanse of sugar cane fields. In this Palm Beach, laborers harvest cane in the hot sun, and unemployment is more than 50 percent.

The district has a slogan that encapsulates these contrasts: “From Sugar to Sand.” With 174,000 students, 21,000 employees and 228 schools, Palm Beach County is the fifth-largest district in Florida. Its student body is 64 percent non-white and 55 percent low-income. The district has been making strides toward attaining its lofty goal of “Achievement for All”—getting the best results from every child in its vast territory, no matter how rich or how poor—and serves as an example for other mixed-income districts across the country.

More and more of the district’s Hispanic and black students are reaching the highest academic levels on the state assessments, and Palm Beach’s graduation rates have been growing at a rapid clip. From 2006 to 2009, the graduation rates of black and Hispanic students grew by 21 percentage points and 13 percentage points, respectively. Meanwhile, black student participation in college readiness exams has been increasing faster than it has in 90 percent of the nation’s largest urban districts, earning the district a spot as a first-time Broad Prize finalist.



The district has achieved these results by embracing what it calls “Single School Culture”—an approach that ensures consistency in discipline

and instruction. Palm Beach makes extensive and innovative use of data to strengthen teacher performance, tailor instruction to students and monitor their progress toward graduation. Palm Beach has also deployed graduation coaches at high schools across the district to make sure that every student remains on track for a diploma, and the district offers a broad array of choice programs for students at all academic levels.

CONSISTENCY IS THE DISTRICT WATCHWORD

Single School Culture is founded on the belief that all students can achieve at high levels if their teachers believe in, and nurture, each student’s academic potential. The approach places a premium on consistency and communication—the idea is to generate a clear understanding of how a school approaches academics, climate and discipline. “It’s a way of letting people know, ‘This is how we do things around here,’” says Area Superintendent Camille Coleman. “When you set clear expectations, students rise to the occasion.”

The Single School approach often begins with agreeing on clear rules around discipline, a prerequisite for an effective learning environment. For example, when Keith Oswald took over as principal of Boynton Beach High School in 2008, he promptly called the staff together to hash out some student rules the entire teaching faculty could all agree on: No headphones. No cellphones. Follow the dress code. Don’t be late to class. They reached a consensus on rules and, just as important, how to enforce them. If five minutes late meant a tardy citation in one class, it would mean a tardy citation in every class. Individual teachers would not be allowed to modify the standards.

“If one teacher lets kids listen to their iPhone during their free time, it’s hard for the next teacher who tells them they can’t,” Oswald says. “That sort of thing pits teacher against teacher.”

On the academic side, Single School Culture means getting teachers across the district on the same page with respect to curriculum and instruction—and giving individual schools



the resources to meet their particular needs. These efforts start with a close look at data, says Rosemarie Backhus, the district’s coordinator of Single School Culture for academics.

If the numbers show a school or a class is lagging on a particular assessment, an action plan is developed to improve the results, and resources are deployed accordingly. Teaching coaches are sent in to consult and model best practices. During weekly Learning Team Meetings, instructional leaders and teachers review best teaching practices, making sure everyone is up to speed on the latest strategies. The teachers in each school then decide which techniques would be most beneficial for their students, and how to apply them.

At all schools, teachers unpack the state assessment standards, breaking down the different skills that test questions are intended to measure. If a test is assessing a student’s critical thinking skills, for example, then teachers make sure to do more than just teach them the names of important figures or dates of historical events. Instead of asking students to memorize the turning points of the American Civil War, they would ask them to think about its economic causes or its consequences for women. “The whole thing is all about rigor,” Backhus says.

THE EDUCATION DATA WAREHOUSE

The foundation of Palm Beach County’s focus on academic excellence is found in the district’s Education Data Warehouse (EDW), an online database that is updated daily with a wealth of information including test scores, grades, attendance and suspensions. The EDW churns out a steady stream of reports to help administrators, teachers and principals make informed decisions about instruction and school management.

The managers of the EDW have made extraordinary efforts to ensure that it is user-friendly and that all the district’s teachers understand its benefits. “You don’t really need to know anything to make it work except how to read colors,” says Marc Baron, the district’s chief of performance and accountability, referring to its multi-hued reports. “The power of this is that it helps teachers decide how they can change their instruction and improve student performance.”

Baron’s department has six trainers who have taught three or four staffers at each school to serve as “data liaisons,” spreading the word about the EDW and answering questions about how it works. The district has data for everything—including how frequently individual teachers and schools use data. In 2009, the EDW churned out 700,000 reports. Last year, it produced 1.7 million. Many teachers and staff have learned how to run the reports on their own.

The data has myriad uses. At the district level, the information is used to identify schools that are flourishing or floundering in a given subject. If one school has low scores on a reading assessment, for example, a coach might be sent from another school that is strong in that subject.

“We align our resources strategically based on the information we see in the Data Warehouse,” says Mark Howard, the district’s manager of research, evaluation and assessment. “If you see a school in greater need, then you deploy your resources accordingly.”



Palm Beach teachers also use data to inspire and motivate students, many of whom can recite their scores on various assessments. “I got 1,161 points in reading,” says Martin, a fifth-grader at Wynnebrook Elementary School. “My goal is 1,200. I got the highest score in my class, but it’s not the highest in the school. Someone else got 1,400!” Martin and two of his buddies are engaged in a friendly competition to see who can notch the highest score.

A SINGLE-MINDED FOCUS ON GRADUATION

Like many urban school systems, Palm Beach has placed a priority on boosting its high school graduation rate. (The district’s former superintendent always referred to graduation as the “crown jewel” of public education, and the phrase has been widely embraced in the district.) Between 2006 and 2009, Palm Beach County’s overall graduation rate jumped by 18 percentage points to



74 percent, placing it in the top 20 percent of all 75 districts eligible for The Broad Prize.

The district has deployed “graduation gatekeepers” to make sure high school students stay on track for a diploma, arming them with data for individual students, information like grades, credits, test scores and community service hours. Dwyer High School’s former assistant principal, Christine Rick, now an elementary school principal, served as the campus’s graduation gatekeeper and she monitored the EDW daily. If she found a student with a shortage of community service credits, she tracked the student down and steered him to an opportunity for credit recovery. If she found students who were a class or two behind, she helped enroll them in online credit-recovery classes offered by the district.

Palm Beach’s intense focus on graduation extends not only to students at risk of dropping out, but also to luring back the ones who have already left school. Rick pored over data to identify former students who were close enough to graduation that they could make up missing credits quickly. “I called them on the phone and searched for them on Facebook,” she says. “I found one student who was in Texas.” She tracked him down and helped him make up his credits from afar.

**AN EXTENSIVE
ARRAY OF SCHOOL
CHOICE**

Administrators believe that the district’s graduation rate has also been boosted by its extensive selection of magnet-style academies and other choice programs. Students can choose from among 227 programs focusing on everything from criminal justice to nursing to finance. More than half of the district’s high school students have enrolled in such programs.

At Seminole Ridge High School—home of the Hawks—170 students have enrolled in a Construction Academy, where they are building a house for Habitat for Humanity. The three-bedroom, two-bath home is under construction in the school’s cavernous workshop. “When it’s finished, we’re going to wheel it right out the back door,” says John Walker, the academy coordinator. “The kids are doing everything—the framing, the drywall, the electric. Everything we build, the kids do it all.”

Robert Trepp, a local electrician who teaches at the academy, says students are more inspired to stick with school when they are studying a subject that engages them.

“I know at least six different kids who graduated from high school because of this program,” he says.

Core subjects are incorporated into the construction curriculum. “This is basically a big physics and math project,” Walker says. “It requires an understanding of measurement, geometry, vectors. How much weight can the roof support? It’s basic science and physics.”

Priscilla, who is entering her senior year, has been so inspired by her work in the Construction Academy that she intends to become an engineer. “I really like math, and it really factors into everything we’re doing,” she says. Best of all, Priscilla says, is the fact that the home will go to a family in need. “It’s not just some little project that we’re going to tear down. Once it’s finished, we’re going to meet the family that’s moving in and give them this special gift.”

In Palm Beach County, that’s what education is all about: launching students into the world with valuable skills and a sense of mission. ■



The Decision-Makers



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The Broad Prize selection jury is comprised of nationally prominent individuals from business and industry, government and public service. The jury reviews the statistical data and site visit reports for each finalist district and chooses the winner of The Broad Prize.

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RMC Research Corporation is a nationally recognized research and professional services organization. Using a research-based rubric for district quality that was developed exclusively for The Broad Prize, RMC leads a site visit team of researchers and practitioners through the collection and analysis of interviews, documents and observations of Broad Prize finalist district practices.

Ben Stocking, Project Journalist

Broad Prize Project Journalist Ben Stocking has worked in journalism for three decades, starting at a small suburban weekly and eventually becoming a foreign correspondent in Vietnam. During his eight years in Hanoi, he served as Southeast Asia bureau chief for the San Jose Mercury News and Vietnam bureau chief for the Associated Press. He has extensive writing, editing and management experience at leading American news organizations. His writing has focused on international affairs, race relations, immigration, politics, human rights, poverty reduction and public health.

Learn More

To learn more about the best practices in this year’s Broad Prize finalist districts, please contact:

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