

**Celebrating  
America's  
most improved  
public school  
districts.**

The 2013 Broad Prize

## About the Winner

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### **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 previously served as superintendent of the San Diego Unified School District and Guilford County Schools in Greensboro, N.C.

##### *Governance*

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

##### *Teachers Union*

Texas is a right-to-work state.

**\$1.58 billion**

Annual Budget

**\$7,052**

Per Pupil Expenditures

**7**

Rank Among U.S. School Districts

**203,354**

Number of Students

**11,417**

Number of Teachers

**276**

Number of Schools

**30%**

Students Designated as English Language Learners

**80%**

Students Eligible for Free and Reduced-Price School Lunch

#### **Student Demographics**

**25%**

African-American

**3%**

Asian/Pacific Islander

**63%**

Hispanic

**8%**

White

**1%**

Other

## STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

### **Students in the Houston Independent School District (HISD) performed better than expected compared to other districts in Texas with similar poverty rates.**

Following the statewide introduction of a more rigorous test in 2012, proficiency rates for students at Houston Independent School District exceeded expectations, given the district's poverty rate, in elementary, middle and high school math and science and in elementary and middle school reading. In addition, growth in the proportion of middle and high school Hispanic students at the advanced level in math and science for the period 2009-2012 was in the top 30 percent across all districts in Texas.

### **HISD's overall graduation rate improved twice as fast as other urban districts around the country.**

HISD's graduation rate, as shown by the average of three nationally recognized graduation rate estimation methods, increased 12 percentage points between 2006 and 2009, compared to an average 6 percent increase for the 75 Broad Prize-eligible districts over the same period.

### **Houston narrowed low-income and Hispanic achievement gaps.**

In recent years, HISD narrowed the achievement gap between its low-income students and the state's non-low-income students by about half in high school math and science and by about 40 percent in middle school math and science. In addition, the district narrowed achievement gaps between its Hispanic students and the state's white students by more than 50 percent in high school math and science and by more than 40 percent in middle school math and science.

### **Houston has the highest SAT participation rate among other urban districts around the country for all students and specifically for Hispanic and African-American students.**

In 2012, 87 percent of Houston's students participated in the SAT, and 84 percent of Hispanic and 80 percent of African-American students took the exam. HISD's SAT participation rate is about two-thirds higher than the state's average participation rate.

### **Houston's increases in participation in Advanced Placement (AP) exams for all students and specifically for Hispanic students were the highest among other urban districts around the country.**

For example, between 2009 and 2012, the average annual increase in the AP participation rate by Houston's Hispanic students was five times greater than the average among the 75 Broad Prize-eligible districts.

## EXEMPLARY PRACTICES RELATED TO STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

### **The district invests in human capital and uses performance-focused data to support a strong system of accountability.**

Since 2009, HISD has focused on investing in its principals, teachers and other employees and put in place a system-wide level of accountability. The increased emphasis on human capital investment led the district to become far more selective in hiring and more rigorous in evaluating personnel performance.

High-performing personnel are rewarded through performance pay, and ineffective personnel are exited. The district links teacher evaluations to student performance, providing bonuses to top performers. Between the 2008-09 and 2011-12 school years, HISD paid a total of \$136 million to highly effective teachers. Every teacher in the district is placed into one of four performance tiers. Before 2009, the district did not differentiate its teachers, and only 4 percent of teachers had growth plans. Today, all teachers in the bottom quartile are on growth plans, and top teachers mentor others. This results-driven environment led to the retention of 90 percent of highly effective teachers and the dismissal of 54 percent of the district's low-performing teachers in 2011-12, a 14-percentage point increase in the exit rate from 2009-10.

Everyone is expected to improve. Each year, principals are required to identify SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and time-bound) goals they will focus on—and improve on—for the year. Principals align their budgets with their SMART goals, whether it's hiring more and higher-qualified teachers in a particular subject, investing in technology, boosting security or other needs. Teachers each year also identify two improvement areas to work on, such as differentiating instruction or working on higher-order thinking.

Teachers routinely analyze and use data to determine the effectiveness of their instructional strategies. They also use data to differentiate instruction and to identify students who need interventions or re-teaching. Data often are shared within the professional learning community (PLC) to help everyone improve their effectiveness. For example, some teachers swap students when one teacher is particularly effective at teaching a particular concept. Many teachers replicate one another's lessons, comparing notes about teaching strategies after the data show who is most successful.

At the district level, HISD reports detailed data regularly to show progress toward meeting each goal and core initiative in its strategic plan. The district presents quarterly achievement reports to the board and annual reports on human capital and safety. Every two years, the district provides updates on management effectiveness, public support and confidence in schools and district culture reports. The district's department of research and accountability conducts about 40 program evaluations annually. Data are used to identify areas of improvement and to decide whether to continue programs.

### **The district provides multiple types of differentiated professional development to all teachers and instructional staff to help meet district and school goals.**

To bolster its human capital investments, HISD provides an extensive menu of professional development opportunities—focused on both content and pedagogy—to all educators. For example, the Neuhaus Educational Center delivers multi-day professional development on early literacy and then works with principals to calibrate classroom observations to ensure that teachers are applying the strategies with fidelity. HISD offers timely professional development to implement new district-wide initiatives. For example, the district worked with Rice University and the Baylor College of Medicine to design and deliver STEM education training. Professional development was provided for teachers to understand the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), Texas College and Career Readiness Standards and to improve algebra scores. In recent years, HISD has provided copious amounts of in-depth professional development on how to use data to improve student achievement.

HISD's professional development menu of options is differentiated by grade/course level, subject and prior knowledge. Offerings include courses for new teachers on ESL strategies and frameworks, problem-solving strategies for teachers in second through fifth grades, intervention strategies by core content area, career technical education teacher training for sixth through twelfth grades, training for new Advanced Placement teachers, and courses for special education teachers.

HISD reorganized in late 2009, moving from a system of vertically aligned regional offices into horizontally aligned teams led by chief school improvement officers (SIOs) for elementary, middle and high schools. SIOs

work directly with principals to provide support so that students at each grade level can succeed. Individualized coaching and mentoring also is plentiful in the district. The help includes on-campus guidance for educators as a group and for individuals. New teachers are bolstered with an array of supports, including full-time "release mentors," who are placed in schools that have low academic performance, a high number of low-income students, high teacher turnover, and/or high new teacher-staff ratios. The district also provides a campus mentor and instructional coach who assists first- and second-year teachers with classroom management, instructional support and professional development.

### **The district is focused on getting all students college- and career-ready**

To increase rigor and the number of students who are college-ready, HISD requires all high schools to offer at least 15 Advanced Placement (AP) courses. Many middle and high schools adopted the SpringBoard program for pre-AP and AP. The district also pays for all students to take the SAT, AP and International Baccalaureate (IB) exams. Every high school offers dual-enrollment courses, and some middle and high schools provide the Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID) program to help students become better prepared for college by acquiring study skills and the confidence needed for college success. The Career Technical Education (CTE) program was updated in 2011-12 to increase its quality and number of pathways available to students.

Some elementary schools have adopted the Renzulli gifted and talented curriculum for all children. This curriculum is more rigorous than the state's, with a greater emphasis on advanced thinking skills. To help students become ready for college and careers, HISD in 2009-10 began aligning its curriculum to the Texas College and Career Readiness Standards. In 2010, the board adopted a strategic plan that articulates several key strategies for improving the rigor, quality and equity of access to pre-AP and AP programs. Teachers and administrators were asked to set objectives for helping students attain a qualifying score on the AP exam and optimize credits toward a college degree program.

### **HISD holds all schools responsible for student achievement and bolsters struggling schools with critical supports.**

As part of an effort to turn around struggling schools, HISD initiated the Apollo 20 program in 2010. Schools in the program were assigned new principals, and while highly rated staffers were invited to stay, many staff were replaced. These campuses implemented a new schooling model that included extended learning time (190 days of instruction and longer school days), high-dosage tutoring and data-driven instruction. All parents were required to sign contracts to help their children learn and abide by the school rules. In addition, a re-energized dropout prevention program was put into place in the Apollo 20 schools to help students at risk of failing school. Apollo 20 schools also implemented graduation labs, twilight high schools and door-to-door campaigns to re-enroll dropouts.

HISD has strategically placed principals in low-performing schools in recent years. HISD recruited nationwide for principals with strong track records in turning around low-performing schools. In spring 2012, a strategic staffing initiative was launched to attract more high-performing teachers to all schools serving a large percentage of low-income students, namely six elementary schools, nine middle schools and nine high schools. As part of this initiative, schools receive priority access to candidate pools, onsite staffing support from human resources staff, recruitment incentives of \$2,500 each for up to 200 teachers to transfer to a participating school, and professional development and training resources for principals on topics such as building a competency-based model, effective interviewing and marketing your school.

As part of its efforts to invest in current and future school leaders, HISD operates a two-year development program for new principals. Each principal has the opportunity to attend a course in strategic marketing at Rice University to more successfully compete in the educational marketplace. Principals also have access to district professional development to help them become astute fiscal managers and instructional leaders. Each principal has a financial advisor from the district to help them manage school funds and a set of teacher leaders to help increase the rigor and effectiveness of classroom instruction.