

Houston
Independent
School
District



Michael & Susan Dell
FOUNDATION

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“The way we started ASPIRE — was a hurry-up way to do it. You throw eggs against the wall, and guess what, you get scrambled eggs. I’m not sorry about doing things that way. We had a board and superintendent who were willing to stand tight with each other while we were trying to improve upon the model and get it to the place to where it needed to be. This process — the model we had in 2005 — wasn’t particularly good. But we were on the right road, doing the right thing. Because of this, Houston got the attention of Broad, Gates and Dell family foundation, and we knew we were doing something special. Having their support gave us credibility. And it spoke well to the frontier spirit going forward. Houston was breaking ground. I think people often abuse words like reform and change. But, in this case, it was a significant reform in the way things got done.”

DIANNE JOHNSON
FORMER HISD BOARD OF EDUCATION PRESIDENT

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

“Grow. Measure. Recognize. Replicate.” This seemingly simple shorthand formula has actually been a groundbreaking blueprint for eye-opening improvement within the Houston Independent School District (HISD).

Growth — both for students and teachers — is the key word here. Five years ago, HISD leaders perceived their district to be spinning their wheels in an “achievement” maze they could not escape. The achievement model of measuring success (and failure) was built around minimum standards — and that was not best-serving the district’s chief stakeholders, the students.

Instead, led by then-Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Abelardo Saavedra, and then-Board of Education President, Dianne Johnson, HISD adopted a model that concentrated on growth. In short: ensuring that each student was spurred to at least one year’s worth of academic growth during one year of schooling.

What transpired, beginning with the 2006-2007 school year was a program dubbed “ASPIRE” — or in its long form, “Accelerating Student Progress. Increasing Results & Expectations.” Building on the successes of the program — as well as learning from some early stumbles — ASPIRE has quickly evolved into a national model for performance management and educational improvement.

From HISD’s perspective, performance management is a continuous process of aligning the goals of individuals and teams with the organization’s strategic goals — and harnessing the power of data to improve results and develop people.

For the purposes of this case study, four years’ worth of data was analyzed and interviews with current and past district leadership, principals and teachers were conducted to explore the impact of this “growth methodology” on middle school performance within HISD. This particular focus on middle school performance was prompted by national studies that show those years to be a crucial inflection point in a student’s academic career. Simply put, middle school can be the last, best chance to identify students at risk of academic failure and intervene on their behalf. Indeed, those studies indicate that success in key middle school subjects is a strong predictor of success in high school and beyond. According to

one HISD official regarding the four-year Houston results: “The composite growth for all middle schoolers over the past three years has been phenomenal. All academic areas showed growth at levels much higher than were expected.” By another barometer: the number of HISD middle schools receiving state accountability ratings of “Recognized” or “Exemplary” has doubled.

The key to making the Grow-Measure-Recognize-Replicate formula work is the “measure” component. The tools adopted were the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and the Stanford Achievement Test. But the raw, bottom-line scores are not the measuring stick. Instead, the data are ground through a complex and, in part, proprietary formula (Dr. William Sanders’ EVAAS® system). What emerges is a score that reflects the student’s one year growth...and, ultimately, how much value was added by the teacher and the school.

Teachers and principals are then recognized (rewarded) on an individual basis, based on that growth through the ASPIRE Award Program. This pay-for-performance program has proven to be a lightning rod with some teachers and their employee organization — especially as the early communication efforts with teachers has been dubbed by some as “a total failure.” Some teachers say they don’t understand the formula by which they are being judged; others feel threatened that their jobs are on the line.

HISD officials, led by current Superintendent of Schools Dr. Terry Grier who took the district reins in 2009, say that ASPIRE has created a new culture — one of continuous improvement. And that it has fostered collaboration and communication among educators, students, families and community members. That interplay underlines the fourth important component — which is to identify and then replicate best practices within classrooms and across campuses. Indeed, every action HISD takes is now driven by the data they are actively collecting and analyzing. The shared goal: Ensuring all students graduate on time, college- and career-ready.

To be sure, ASPIRE suffered through a number of learn-as-we-go issues — in large part due to the Board’s initial desire to “Act... and act now!” But, bottom line, growth within HISD middle schools is accelerating — and expectations and accountability have been heightened.

“ASPIRE has created an organizational focus on student achievement data that no one can argue about. It prevents inattention to results — and ultimately forces us to provide for more rigorous instruction.”

ANN BEST
CHIEF HUMAN RESOURCES OFFICER

WHAT IS ASPIRE?

ASPIRE is HISD’s educational-improvement and performance-management model, designed to engage all employees in creating a culture of excellence. It seeks to accelerate student learning through incenting the right behaviors on the part of a variety of leaders within the school system — including those in the classroom and those who are not. Ultimately, HISD is looking to make sure that more kids achieve at a high level.

Further, the ASPIRE performance management program is about measuring the performance of every department and campus to learn what’s working across the district to share and replicate those practices in every building. In the end, all possible resources work together to prepare every student to be college- and career-ready.

The ASPIRE Award program is also a way to recognize and celebrate the exceptional work and contributions of all campus-based employees and academic leaders as they work to improve the growth of every student. In addition, the district applies innovative, research-based strategies to recruit and retain a highly talented workforce that will best serve and support all aspects of their core business — student learning.

From a data perspective, ASPIRE uses “value-added” as the primary metric of a student’s academic growth over time. It comes from using student performance as a baseline of their past performance and a calculation of the rate of academic growth from year to year using standardized test scores from the TAKS and Stanford national norm-referenced test. A student’s performance is compared to other students who have a similar academic history. The program does not compare how well high-achieving kids do versus low-achieving kids; rather, students are compared against their baseline and to other students who have a similar testing history.

The value-added reports provide an assessment of a school’s influence on student academic progress in tested subjects and grades and are used to establish priorities for the school. The results are used to determine whether teachers and schools are facilitating “expected,” “greater than expected” or “less than expected” academic growth over time. HISD’s expectation is that students will grow academically one year in one year’s worth of instruction.

Where the data show a less than expected academic growth, district leaders, principals and teachers have the opportunity to make a change in instructional and classroom-management strategies, resource allocation or realignment of the curriculum. HISD also implements a range of interventions to provide additional support of students who are not reaching learning targets. The aim is that these changes will be helpful in improving the learning experience through differentiated and personalized learning strategies. The data are also used to identify “effective” teachers from which new ideas and more effective in-class strategies can be mined and shared with others.

HISD uses value-added data on scorecards to monitor and assess performance, as well as to inform and shape specific training and professional development efforts. To ensure that the data are understood by principals and teachers, HISD offers a system of support and ongoing opportunities for professional growth, leadership training, mentoring, professional learning communities and coaching — to help give educators the knowledge, skills and tools they need to help all students succeed.

The ASPIRE program is under constant review to identify opportunities for improvement. Through ASPIRE, HISD is now looking for ways to engage employees at the central-service department and campus levels to achieve the district’s strategic goals and build a culture of continuous learning.

WHY HISD TOOK THIS APPROACH

Originally, HISD’s ASPIRE program was launched strictly as a way to improve the performance pay program by responding to issues raised by teachers and school staff after the first year of implementation. But it quickly and resolutely evolved into a performance management system. It became a system bent on having strong leadership dedicated to sparking substantial and measurable improvement in student performance and teacher instruction through having relevant and actionable data and useful tools and reports available for use in goal setting, planning differentiated instruction and interventions, and follow-up with students.

Spearheading the district’s move to performance management and accountability were then-HISD Superintendent of Schools, Dr. Abelardo Saavedra, and then-HISD Board of Education President, Dianne Johnson. Both believed that Houston needed to be a leader in identifying ways to lift student performance across all levels.

As Dr. Saavedra recalls: “We very purposefully developed the system around a growth model path that, quite frankly, the district had not wanted to go down in the past. Previously, most of the accountability in the district was based on an ‘achievement’ model of measurement. You’d set up a threshold for success - and either you’d get there or you didn’t. Because the district had experienced that for so many years and had accepted that, it placed many low-performing schools or schools with high poverty at a disadvantage. Getting to that threshold of achievement was so great that they were never able to celebrate success — even though in many cases they were actually improving at a higher rate than many of the ‘higher performing’ schools. Going to the growth model allowed more people to celebrate academic achievement at all levels. The culture changed to the positive as a result of the program.”

Dianne Johnson recalls that school systems across the country, particularly urban districts, had spent many years focusing on minimum standards and getting students to a certain level. Unfortunately, keeping districts accountable for a level of achievement did not serve all children. Instead, HISD turned to a different formula to determine success: Growing a child one full year for one full year of school.

Says Johnson: “I am a proponent of accountability. When you have a minimum standards test and a minimum standards mentality and accountability, you can get the entire organization focused on ‘minimum.’ But a performance pay model changed that notion. If you have a classroom full of kids who bring in pretty good test scores (from home) and they do minimum work and don’t show academic growth, those teachers are not going to get the performance pay. The paradigm shift for Houston made it clear that every kid who comes to school deserves a year’s worth of growth in a year’s worth of school. We decided to quit the ‘Urban School System Minimums Standards’ way of life and started being about growing kids wherever they were and refocusing our teachers on student learning.”

“Having ASPIRE — an overall education improvement model — has provided a more focused approach. When the district first initiated pay-for-performance, it didn’t go so well. When it was rebranded as ASPIRE, we had to redirect the real meaning away from just the pay-for-performance aspect and instead to a broader educational improvement model that is focused on successful outcomes and results with kids.”

DR. JULIE BAKER
CHIEF OFFICER OF SPECIAL PROJECTS

INITIAL HURDLES TO SUCCESS

Again, ASPIRE originated — much more narrowly — as an update to the pay-for-performance program, rather than the more robust project management system into which it has morphed. Those who ran the program at the onset openly acknowledge that initial communications with principals and teachers to explain the program and the performance pay was not handled very well.

At the start, the program was run through the HISD’s Research Department — a very capable group of data analysts and well-meaning district employees. But this was not a group experienced at running a large initiative with numerous stakeholders or developing a communications plan, a professional training program and overseeing operational project management. Principals, teachers, employee organizational groups (unions) and administrators alike agreed that initial communications from the district were wholly insufficient.

Dr. Saavedra recalls: “We did a terrible job from the get-go on the communications piece. And I’m not too certain that even when we recognized that it was a problem it still wasn’t as good as it should have been. When we launched the program, we had a number of meetings with teachers across the district — and teachers did not attend. We failed to recognize that ‘failure to attend’ was not the same as ‘acceptance’ or ‘caring’ about the issue. So if the teachers were not in that room, we were not communicating. Same goes for parents. We should have come out at the beginning with different forms of communication. A total flop on our part. We did get better at it — but it took us a while to get there.”

Ultimately, HISD was able to solve a number of the operational issues by convening a cross-functional Executive Committee that assumed active involvement in the programs of departments and stakeholders all throughout the system. Melinda Garrett, HISD Chief Financial Officer, agrees, saying: “We had to get all the players at the table who have a piece of this. It worked much better after that. A lot of this is about communication. In fact, communication is about 60 percent of the job — and the other 40 percent is the sheer decisions and data analysis. But getting the communications down was critical.”

HOW ASPIRE AND THE ASPIRE AWARD PROGRAM HAVE BEEN FUNDED

In 2006, The HISD Board of Education made a seismic shift in the district’s already-in-place campus incentive program. Instead of the previous model — calculated on “campus-based” measures — the new program would be “performance-based” and focus primarily on an individual teacher’s performance. (Campus-based and other achievement measures were retained in addition to the growth measures, although the primary focus was on the growth of individual teachers’ students.)

To get things started, the district rolled the annual \$6 million budget for campus-based accountability bonuses in with a separate fund — one built from a redirection of one-third of the budgeted amount for teacher raises (3%). Teachers would still receive a 2% bump in pay, but would now have the opportunity to achieve higher bonuses through the performance pay program. In the first year of the program, the district paid out more than \$17 million in awards.

HISD has steadily built up a reserve of approximately \$30 million for distribution each year — exclusive of federal and state grant monies — to pay for the program. The addition of state and U.S. Department of Education Teacher Incentive Fund (TIF) grants has increased the total payout amount to more than \$41 million for the 2008-2009 school year.

The program does provide differentiated pay for teachers of “core” subjects (math, science, reading, social studies, writing) based on students’ performance on state and national standardized tests, such as TAKS or the Stanford achievement test. That said, teachers of non-core subjects are eligible for an ASPIRE award using building-based accountability and overall student growth measures. In addition, principals and other school building leaders also receive differentiated awards based on their own building’s growth. In the most recent distribution — for the 2008-2009 school year — annual awards for teachers ranged from \$100 up to a maximum of \$10,903. During that same period, 78% of employees in the HISD received an ASPIRE award. HISD leadership reviews the ASPIRE Award Program on an annual basis to adjust eligibility requirements and award levels in order to keep the district competitive with other top school districts.

ASPIRE Award Program Payments Made to Date— Rewarding Academic Growth

Houston Independent School District:
ASPIRE Performance Pay —
Campus-Based Employees

YEAR	\$ PAID	# OF RECIPIENTS	% OF ELIGIBLE
2005-06 Payment (Paid 2007)	\$17,007,023	10,233	58%
2006-07 Payment (Paid 2008)	\$24,653,725	13,157	78%
2007-08 Payment (Paid 2009)	\$31,581,703	15,844	87%
2008-09 Payment (Paid 2010)	\$40,540,560	15,704	88%
Total Payments under ASPIRE	\$113,782,511		

In 2008, the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation awarded the district a \$1.8 million grant to expand ASPIRE into performance management at the Central Office, in addition to the existing program at the campus level. Specifically, the grant allowed the district to perform an in-depth annual review of the ASPIRE data in order to develop a “school scorecard” and conduct deeper analysis of all data sets for performance management. In addition, the Foundation’s grant went toward the development of Central Office department metrics. Those measure the work of central-services employees as they incorporate innovative practices to deliver high-quality services, increase efficiencies in operations and implement cost-saving strategies, allowing more resources to be used in the classroom.

Three subsequent grants from the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation totaling \$2.6 million have gone towards performance management planning and diagnostics and their performance management implementation, including technology support and school performance management system.

Two additional grants from The Eli and Edythe Broad Foundation and the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation have defrayed other costs — including those for program administration, operations, infrastructure, professional development for principals and teachers (for both instruction and data analysis), communications programs, development of public website, and data collection analysis costs (including contract with SAS EVAAS®). Those grants also provide the district with funds to establish procedures, as well as a mechanism to process each of the individual teacher inquiries about their calculations, scores and individual ASPIRE award.

ASPIRE SUCCESSES ARE SPURRING MARKED IMPROVEMENT

The ASPIRE program — with its laser-focus on growth — is achieving what it set out to do. Dr. Julie Baker, Chief Officer of Major Projects, can see the tidal shift. “When you focus on academic growth, you will get the achievement...it will come. Our focus has been all about accelerating academic growth — and we’re seeing the results.”

Among the positives: having the data in-hand has forced schools to pay attention to the learning deficiencies of their children. Teachers in high-poverty schools are beginning to zero-in on reducing those learning deficiencies. Looking across HISD teacher value-added scores, the scores are, in nearly all cases, moving in a positive direction. Significantly, this improvement includes the bottom quartile of teachers — many of whom are now facilitating higher-than-expected levels of student academic growth.

Teachers have become more focused on outcomes and are adjusting their courses in response to specific needs of students. They are really thinking about student data now. Ann Best, HISD’s Chief Human Resources Officer, suggests there is more work to be done through increased training and professional development. “We now need to increase their skills in analyzing and using the data,” she says.

Best continues: “ASPIRE has increased our ability to attract high performers. And, at the same time the ASPIRE Award Program not only thanks them for their efforts, it professionalizes the teaching profession and makes it comparable to other professionals in society.”

EDUCATIONAL CAPACITY IS IMPROVING

The ASPIRE program has qualitatively increased the educational capacity within HISD middle schools, purely by shifting the culture from helping students achieve to helping them grow. The opportunity to have the SAS EVAAS® value-added data at their fingertips has allowed many teachers and principals to identify the most effective strategies in the classroom based on the type of learners in their classroom.

According to Dr. Charles Morris, HISD Deputy Chief Academic Officer, “The ASPIRE program — specifically, having student data — has led to instructional changes and caused principals and teachers to do things a little differently. And, for many, it helps them financially — as they have the opportunity to earn ASPIRE awards.”

“Many principals are now thinking differently. They’re using the data to identify those teachers who are high performers — truly growing their students — and are beginning to study what makes them so successful in the classroom. Further, they’re taking the next crucial step and finding ways to replicate those best practices throughout the building.”

Roger Bunnell, Principal at Hamilton Middle School, has been a principal for nine years and a member of the ASPIRE Advisory Committee for four years. He has long been interested in using data and feels that principals in Houston are well-versed in looking at data to make better instructional, managerial and employment decisions. “I know which teachers in my building are the top performers and I am always looking for ways to replicate those best practices within the building — especially those ideas that have proven to work with our population. I want to have them model those skills and good practices so that all students can benefit, in any subject. Good practices are good practices. So, for instance, if we know that starting with a warm up is an effective method, then we should do it in language arts, math, PE or band.”

“ASPIRE made campuses get their acts in gear. I have seen some improvements in some of the teaching ideas and how class assignments are made. In our school, we have integrated physics and chemistry together — but you have to have the math skills to do that, so (as Math Chair) I get involved. Our two departments are working together to show big improvements.”

RACHEL RATCLIFF
LANIER MIDDLE SCHOOL MATH
DEPARTMENT CHAIR

“ASPIRE is challenging how we work with all our students. Having the data in-hand makes us cognizant of the different learning styles and allows teachers to adjust their in-class style accordingly.”

DR. CHARLES MORRIS
HISD DEPUTY CHIEF ACADEMIC OFFICER

“We believe ASPIRE is helping to attract better talent to the district... and to retain top performers. And that makes principals happy.”

ANN BEST
CHIEF HUMAN RESOURCES OFFICER

Many schools are trying new strategies found in other buildings, simply by talking with other teachers and principals. Some principals are pairing high-performing teachers with those who may be struggling a bit. Some principals are circulating lower-performing teachers through higher-performing teachers' classrooms to allow them to observe and learn. Some will bring in a substitute teacher to take a class period or take the class themselves so that teachers can experience those best practices in person.

Teachers have shared that, even though the award money can have some negative competitive side effects, they do try and share their tricks-of-the-trade with others who are showing negative growth — simply because they care about the students. One teacher confided that she worked with a young teacher whose first-year scores were showing negative growth. “I know she works hard. She does a great deal of work on her own. But I had to better understand what she was not doing well so that we could turn it around. I urged her to get some additional professional development and go to the EVAAS® training class to better understand the data. The ASPIRE data motivated her to make the changes necessary to show value. She took it on — head on — and proved she could be an effective teacher.”

Rachel Ratcliff, a teacher at Lanier Middle School, says: “The key to the numbers is the opportunity to share growth strategies within the school. What are the best practices that can come from this?” She also believes that on some campuses they sit down with the teachers and plan out strategies to make the scores higher — but has concerns that may put too much pressure on students to perform. “I think focusing too much on the TAKS test adds undue pressure on the students. It is absurd for them to pour over sample test questions or develop strategies to check each answer.”

HISD has begun to put the “best practices” philosophy into operation. The district is actively targeting “highly effective teachers” and inviting them to paid off-site training sessions where HISD listens and learns. They then share those practices with the rest of the teaching corps via online training sessions that feature videos and PowerPoint presentations.

MEASURES OF SUCCESS

HISD uses a range of key metrics to measure the progress of the ASPIRE program, including value-added growth scores, the Texas Education Agency Standard Accountability System rankings, and attitudinal survey data among principals, teachers and staff. All measures assist the district in determining the extent to which their key messages and learning goals are communicated and delivered at the classroom and building level.

A key component of the ASPIRE model is using high-quality data sources, particularly value-added analysis, to guide instructional decision-making. Value-added analysis is a statistical method used to measure teachers' and schools' impact on students' academic progress from year to year. HISD uses value-added analysis calculated using Dr. William Sanders' SAS EVAAS® model to measure student progress at the school, grade, teacher, and student levels. SAS EVAAS® is recognized as the most statistically rigorous model for calculating value-added analysis nationwide. Using this growth metric, teachers, schools and districts can begin interpreting the impact of their curriculum, instruction, programs and practices on student achievement.

In layman's terms, the EVAAS® system calculates what an expected level of growth would be in each classroom. Using the TAKS and Stanford assessments (depending on grade and subject), the program measures the amount of growth a student has gained in a teacher's class over one year's time. A growth gain of zero means that the growth achieved is about what was expected over a year's worth of instruction. If the growth achieved in the classroom is greater than expected, the model shows a positive Normal Curve Equivalent (NCE) gain.

In gathering and analyzing the middle school data for the purpose of this report, the composite growth for all Houston middle school students (grades 6 through 8) over the past three years school years (2006-07 through 2008-09) has been nothing short of phenomenal, showing a composite growth across all academic areas at +2.4 NCEs. This score indicates much greater academic growth than should have been expected. It is important to note that there was above-average growth shown across all academic areas tested. The greatest amount of growth was seen in Reading (at a +3.0), followed by language (+2.5), Mathematics (+2.2), Social Studies (+2.2) and Science (+2.0). [NOTE: See accompanying chart.]

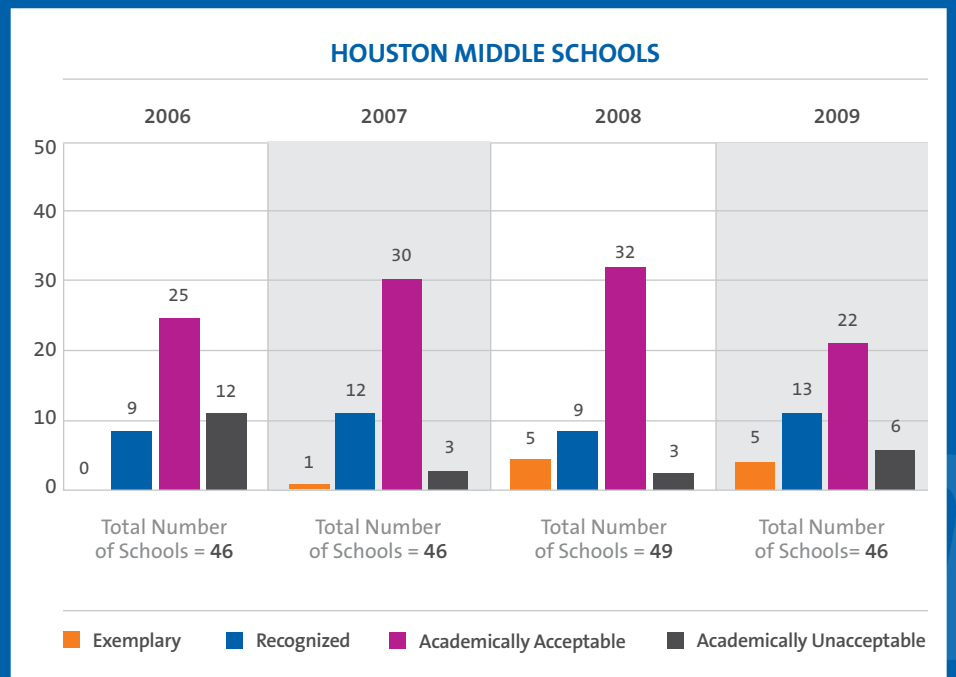
Again, this success is magnified by the indisputable importance of the middle school years as a barometer for future success. Studies emphasize that middle school matters more than ever — and teachers face an uphill climb, as middle schoolers are at risk for sharp declines in academic motivation and achievement. Identifying at-risk students in middle school and providing timely interventions is a significant difference-maker.

The second measure of success for HISD is the Texas Education Agency (TEA) Accountability System. The Accountability System is a method for evaluating school districts and campuses with regard to their student performance on certain "base indicators." The ratings employed in the Accountability System range from "Exemplary" to "Recognized" to "Academically Acceptable" to "Academically Unacceptable." To determine a campus'/district's rating, TEA examines completion rates, dropout rates, and performance on the TAKS exam.

Since the inception of the ASPIRE program, Houston middle schools have improved dramatically according to this metric. Initial ratings in 2006 showed only 9 of 46 middle schools were rated as “Recognized” or higher. That number is now 18. Further, HISD has been able to reduce the number of “Academically Unacceptable” middle schools by half over the four-year period.

In regard to accountability ratings, Carla Stevens, HISD Assistant Superintendent, Office of Research and Accountability, is clear about how HISD views the TEA ratings. “The TEA rating is a state calculation. It is what our state uses to rate our schools. These ratings are printed in the newspaper and are seen everywhere by everybody, so obviously we care about our success. But while the TEA ratings do matter, our focus is on the academic growth of every individual child. We are not chasing the accountability rating. Our charge is ensuring academic growth for every child. When we do that, the ratings will come.”

Houston Middle Schools Over Past 4 Years Since the Inception of ASPIRE Program



A third way HISD measures success of ASPIRE is through annual attitudinal surveys of teachers and staff. This survey is designed to gain insight regarding the level of knowledge and perceptions of HISD teachers and staff about the implementation of growth-based pay, among other issues, including training. In February 2010, the Research and Accountability Department conducted the fourth annual survey among 7,248 teachers and staff. Key findings of the survey included:

- 72% of teachers indicated that communications from the district was moderately or very effective in sharing where to find information about their specific ASPIRE Award;
- 71% of teachers say they have received training regarding the use of value-added data, up from 58% in 2007;
- 55% of teachers agree that the ASPIRE award has encouraged them to use value-added data to make instructional decisions, down slightly from 59% in 2009;
- 55% of teachers hold a favorable view of the concept of performance pay, down from 69% in 2007;
- Although the increase in percent of respondents who are in favor specifically of the ASPIRE Award program is only two percentage points (44.4 percent in 2007 to 46.5 percent in 2010), the decrease in the percent of respondents who are opposed to the ASPIRE Award has dropped substantially over the past three years (39% in 2007 to 27% in 2010); and
- 43% of teachers favor performance pay based on individual student growth, down significantly 57% in 2009 and 62% in 2007.

There is no doubt that the 2010 Teacher Satisfaction Survey was impacted by the February 12, 2010 Board of Education meeting at which the Board of Education approved using value-added data as the 34th criteria to evaluate teacher effectiveness. Questions and uncertainties arose regarding the impact of this policy for teachers. When the 2008-2009 ASPIRE Award Survey was launched on February 23, 2010 amid this policy change, sufficient time had not elapsed to fully address questions or correct misconceptions. It is highly likely that the climate of concern that was evident among teachers during that time impacted their responses to the survey items.

SOURCE FOR SURVEY DATA HISD Research and Accountability website <http://www.houstonisd.org>

LESSONS LEARNED: MISSTEPS AND AREAS TO IMPROVE UPON

HISD is candid about the missteps the ASPIRE program took in its first four years. There have been a number of lessons learned which other districts should keep in mind.

1. The value-added data collection, processing and analysis presents two main issues:
 - a. In regard to the ASPIRE Awards Program, it is critical to educate both teachers and principals about how value-added is derived. The material needs to be presented in ways that feel accessible and digestible. Without this education and training, buy-in from these two stakeholder groups becomes troublesome.
 - b. In terms of training teachers and principals how to use data to inform instructional decisions, training must be mandatory and use multiple activities (in-person, online, small groups) and multiple sessions to ensure the data sets and processes are understood.

“The fact that we have a number of teachers who get high levels of ASPIRE dollars and they don’t understand why they got it speaks to the problem. We haven’t done a good job in educating about value-added data. Educating the educator is the key.”

DR. TERRY GRIER
SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

“Principals are concerned because they didn’t understand the numbers and how value-added data is derived. They are used to trying to make things equitable. In this case, fair isn’t always equal.”

ANN BEST
CHIEF HUMAN RESOURCES OFFICER

“I want principals to think, ‘Why don’t we use this data to help us make and manage our instructional decisions in a way that will really have a positive impact on learning?’ It’s been slow to materialize, but we are getting there.”

DR. TERRY GRIER
SUPERINTENDENT OF SCHOOLS

2. As detailed more fully in the “Initial Hurdles to Success” portion of this report, initial communication with principals and teachers was the number one shortfall. Not getting buy-in from teachers, especially, has had a carry-over effect in gaining their acceptance of the program. HISD has remedied the communications gap by employing a third-party professional organization to provide strategic counsel, foster transparency, increase understanding of key goals and increase positive perceptions through improved communication to all stakeholders. Among the lessons learned was that creating a common language among key stakeholders is critical for understanding. Develop the language without using buzzwords. Give them the rubric upfront: This is what you need to do to be successful. This is how I want you to use this data in a school building. Work with a large and varied advance team of stakeholder leaders to test the materials to ensure the language, tasks and expectations are clear.
3. Process is important.
 - a. For instance, getting timely operational systems in place can reduce hard feelings — and allow the critical data to be used in quicker fashion. In regard to the distribution of ASPIRE Award payments, HISD’s process has been described by teachers and principals as awkward and drawn out. Tests are administered from January through May. Test data arrive from the state as late as June. The SAS EVAAS data come to the district in August/September. Additional state data arrive in November. The district informs stakeholders about expected pay in early December. After a one-month teacher/employee review of the estimated award, the money arrives in January. In addition to the annoyance of not receiving the pay as timely as teachers might hope, the time lag makes it difficult to use the information for summer planning or professional development.
 - b. Departments must be in lock-step on strategic initiatives, communicating constantly to ensure full alignment between strategy and actions. As an example, HISD’s annual teacher survey had been conducted in May for two years to allow for time to pass between delivery of the ASPIRE Award and the opportunity to rate their satisfaction with the program, communications and key behaviors. However, the 2010 survey was conducted in February after complaints from administration regarding the volume of surveys administered in May — within 10 days of a controversial action taken by the Board of Education to approve using value-added data and growth measures as part of the process to evaluate teacher effectiveness. The survey was conducted during an unexpected firestorm of controversy, confusion and misconceptions among teachers — hardly a time to be asking tracking questions regarding satisfaction and agreement about alignment with goals.

WHAT’S NEXT FOR ASPIRE?

In September 2009, Dr. Terry Grier became the Houston Independent School District’s Superintendent of Schools after a unanimous vote of approval by the district’s Board of Education. Dr. Grier, who replaced a retiring Dr. Abelardo Saavedra, is especially well-regarded for his work in reducing high school dropout rates and leading school districts through major changes.

“Dr. Grier is on-board with ASPIRE 110 percent,” says current Board of Education President Greg Meyers. “One of the basis in his decision to come to HISD, is he saw an opportunity. He saw a board that is beyond reform-minded — we are transformation-minded. And he is too. So there was an immediate ‘click’ between the board and the superintendent. We all have a sense of urgency. Every day that’s lost in a child’s education is vital. It’s great to see somebody that has such a passion.”

What is next for ASPIRE? Under Dr. Grier's leadership, two major initiatives are teed up. The first is an all-encompassing, five-year effort to place an effective teacher in every HISD classroom and an exemplary principal in every school. The second initiative is the creation of a data warehouse that pools all collected information. Meyers continues, "We have earmarked \$8 million for this data warehouse initiative. This will literally pull this performance management piece full-circle and truly have a system that will communicate district-wide. Our principals will be able to pull tremendously rich data, in almost real-time, to where they can pinpoint down to the child what needs to be done intervention-wise."

Dr. Grier is also clear that finding a way to successfully train nearly 13,000 teachers, 300 principals and 900 assistant principals in meaningful way is a daunting task. "We are so large — we just haven't figured it out yet. That is a front-burner issue."

Further, Dr. Grier also is concerned about ensuring that the data reaches the hands of the users — the teachers, the principals and the parents. Technology remains the most efficient way to accomplish that goal. Still, Chief Human Resources Officer Ann Best and Chief Officer of Major Projects Dr. Julie Baker remain focused on delivery for students. Neither plans to let grass grow under their feet.

Says Best: "We have created a vision for success for each student... that each child has the opportunity to reach for something. It provides a sense of hope — a hope for growth. It facilitates smart thinking."

Dr. Baker stresses that "Success isn't a one-shot deal. We continue to learn, listen and refine to improve. We don't waiver. Those things cause us to have long-term success and we are getting the sustained and increased results."

Principal Roger Bunnell believes that the ASPIRE program shows HISD is committed to a world-class education. "In the end, we are using this data to ensure we have a highly qualified and effective teacher in the classroom. And the same goes for principals. We have to keep pushing to make sure we are bringing in the most highly effective leaders."

Former Board President Dianne Johnson, the program's earliest champion, stresses that anyone considering an ASPIRE-style performance management system needs to go in with Texas-sized gumption. "If someone else tries this... when you change a big organization and it is dramatic, there will always be resistance. So, the policy makers — the board, the superintendent and his or her top executives — they have to hang together with the imperfections and implement the program. And then, with humility, form the right committees to smooth over those imperfections with the mindset of continuous improvement."

Current Board of Education President Greg Meyers sums it up as HISD moves forward: "This board — and I guarantee you, Dr. Grier — we're never satisfied. We want to see continual growth. Dr. Grier says this — and this board believes it: Not only do we want to be the best school district in the state of Texas, not only do we want to be the best urban district in the country... but we want to be the best district in the country. Houston is at the launching pad. I know we're not going to fail. The opportunities put before us are tremendous. We're invigorated. We're marching to the same beat. This is difficult work — it is new territory. But we're ready to do what needs to be done for the kids."

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