Houston’s Balanced Approach to Improving Instruction: Redefining the Role of the School District under Standards-Based Reform

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Introduction

“Most concede that Houston is witnessing a remarkable transformation,” noted a recent editorial in the Dallas Morning News which bore the subtitle “How one school district rose from the dead.” In 2000, 80.9 percent of students in the Houston Independent School District (HISD) passed the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) in reading and 80.6 percent passed in math. Just five years earlier, these figures stood at 65.7 percent and 49.4 percent. Gains have been particularly large for African-American, Hispanic and economically disadvantaged students.

These accomplishments have been racked up against the backdrop of a fully developed system of standards and accountability in the Lone Star state. Texas began statewide assessments in 1980, developed a statewide curriculum in 1985, and created an accountability system in 1993. Today, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (or TEKS) spell out what students in each grade should know and be able to do, and students in grades 3-8 and 10 are tested using TAAS in reading, math and other subjects every year to see whether they have learned what the TEKS objectives spell out. All schools and districts in the state are rated based on their performance on TAAS as well as on attendance and dropout rates.

While Texas receives more than its share of attention, standards-based reform has been the dominant reform strategy across the fifty states for over a decade. Its most basic premise is that if we specify the results to be achieved by schools and select clear indicators to measure their progress toward the goals, we can remain flexible and
pluralistic about how these goals are reached. Focusing on results frees policymakers from the need to regulate inputs and processes. Since the 1989 Charlottesville education summit, it has mostly fallen to states (rather than the nation or school districts) to develop standards, assessments aligned to those standards, and a system of rewards and punishments for schools linked to their performance on the assessments. The locus of accountability has generally been individual schools and children, and in most states, this neat arrangement practically ignores school districts.

This paper will examine Houston’s efforts to define its role as a school district in the context of standards-based reform. It is beyond the scope of this paper to investigate the HISD reform strategy as a whole; the focus here will be on the district’s efforts to create large scale improvements in instruction, particularly in reading and math.

**Two theories of the role of school districts**

There are two big ideas about the role local school districts should play—in improving instruction and more generally—once states develop standards, tests, and rewards and punishments linked to results. Some say that the district should essentially disappear. In this view, the point of standards-based reform is to free schools from regulations; each school should then operate much like a charter school, with its principal acting as a CEO. How can a school be held accountable for producing results if the district is forever meddling in its instruction? proponents of decentralization ask.

Others say that districts should do everything in their power to get instruction in all their schools aligned with the state’s academic standards. In this view, school districts should support standards-based reform by identifying methods that work and ensuring
that all schools are delivering the state’s mandated curriculum using the techniques approved by the district. If left to succeed or fail on their own, with no assistance from the district, many schools would simply fail, proponents of top-down management would argue.

Houston’s approach has been to try to find a third way, not telling schools exactly what to do, but not stepping aside either. Schools are given considerable autonomy, but the district is proactive in its efforts to build their capacity to do a better job of boosting achievement. In this paper, I examine three of the district’s main efforts to improve instruction—its reading, math, and curriculum alignment initiatives. I will assess where each initiative falls on the scale of school control vs. district control, and analyze whether the decision made by the district to adopt a relatively top-down or relatively hands-off approach seems to have worked. This analysis may provide lessons for other districts as they feel their way toward a new role under today’s standards-and-accountability regime.

In the first section, I look briefly at HISD’s accomplishments in the context of the state’s overall performance and the achievement of other urban districts. Next, I examine some different approaches to capacity-building, and describe the tensions between the role of a school district and the role of school-level leadership in efforts to build school capacity. The bulk of this paper then consists of my attempts to describe and evaluate three of HISD’s main capacity-building efforts. Finally, I draw some conclusions about the role that a wise district will choose to play under standards-based reform.
Why Houston?

Texas is today reaping the benefits of its long investment in standards-based reform. Statewide, passing rates on TAAS have moved steadily upward since the early 1990s, particularly among Hispanic and African-American students.\(^5\) Students in the state have made similarly impressive gains on the National Assessment of Education Progress (NAEP), the so-called nation’s report card.\(^6\)

Are the gains in HISD, the largest district in Texas with 210,000 students in 298 schools, merely “the Texas miracle” on a smaller scale? While Texas’ accountability system may explain some of the gains, Houston seems to be benefiting more than the average Texas district. Between 1995 and 2000, gains posted in the district exceeded those posted by the state for most categories of students. (See Table 1)

Table 1. Gain in TAAS Reading and Math Passing Rates (Grades 3-8, 10), 1995-2000

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>HISD (increase in percent passing)</th>
<th>State (increase in percent passing)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reading</strong></td>
<td></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>15.2</td>
<td>10.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>African American</td>
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<td>20.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>16.6</td>
<td>15.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>7.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>18.6</td>
<td>16.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Math</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>31.3</td>
<td>26.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>34.5</td>
<td>38.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>36.1</td>
<td>35.8</td>
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<tr>
<td>White</td>
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<td>20.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>36.0</td>
<td>0.6</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System reports.\(^7\)
Compared with the five other large urban areas in Texas (Dallas, Fort Worth, San Antonio, El Paso, and Austin), Houston moved from 4th place in both reading and math to 2nd place in both subjects between 1995 and 2000.8

**Houston’s approach**

What has Houston’s strategy been for achieving these gains? Since 1990, reform in HISD has been guided by a Declaration of Beliefs and Visions which was drafted by recently-elected school board members eager to remake the district. One of those members, and an author of the document, was Rod Paige, former Dean of the College of Education at Texas Southern University, and now superintendent of HISD. The themes of this document included focusing on the core mission of teaching and learning, decentralizing authority, and emphasizing results rather than compliance.9

In *It Takes A City: Getting Serious About Urban School Reform*, Paul Hill, Christine Campbell, and James Harvey write that every systemwide reform strategy must have three elements: opportunities for schools to change how they work, incentives for school performance, and ways of increasing school capabilities.10 In Houston’s case, the first two elements were built into the state’s accountability system (and fully embraced by district leaders), but the third piece had to be locally developed.

Given the context of strong accountability in Texas, the district envisioned a new role for itself; the district office would “become an enabler instead of an enforcer.”11 Rather than managing all school operations from the district office, the district would grant schools flexibility, but it would also do more than just hold schools accountable; the district would attempt to help schools build capacity. Under the leadership of Paige, who
has served as general superintendent since 1994, the district has developed a number of policies aimed at supporting the efforts of schools to improve instruction so that students could reach high standards. Realizing that simply developing high-quality curricular materials or identifying effective instructional methods was not enough, HISD set out to help teachers understand and use the materials and methods.

**How instruction can be improved**

Standards-based reform demands a lot of teachers. If all children are to master challenging content, then all teachers must be able to deliver a curriculum which is aligned to the high standards. While standards-based reform relies on the motivating effect of incentives on students and teachers, teachers must be given the chance to develop the knowledge and skills required to provide more ambitious instruction, or be replaced by teachers who have that knowledge and skills; in other words, the reform strategy is incomplete if it doesn’t include ways of increasing school capabilities.

Those who favor the top-down approach and those who favor the decentralized approach would likely disagree over whether the district or the school should manage this kind of capacity building, but they might not disagree much about ways of improving instruction. There are plenty of examples of individual schools that have raised the quality of teaching, often in response to the pressures of standards-based reform, and there is a good deal of research on how these schools have managed to improve instruction. In one such study, this time of different responses to standards-based reform in Washington state, researchers led by Paul Hill and Robin Lake visited schools serving
low-income children which had made rapid gains on state tests and compared these with schools where scores had improved only modestly or not at all.\textsuperscript{12}

The researchers found that schools that improved had made schoolwide changes in teaching methods and materials, coordinated their efforts to implement these changes every day and in every classroom, and used professional development to remedy particular instructional weaknesses that had been identified as a priority, among other things. These schools improved in part because the teachers inside them were given real opportunities to learn how to do new things.

Most schools, however, are not investing in the right kinds of learning opportunities for teachers. (Neither are most districts.) Research suggests that high-quality professional development is closely linked to concrete classroom practice, not abstract ideas; is embedded in the daily routine of teachers; involves opportunities for them to collaborate with colleagues; and involves opportunities for observation, critique, and reflection.\textsuperscript{13} Yet few teachers today experience this. For most, staff development consists of a handful of “one-shot” workshops and schoolwide presentations with no focus, no follow up, and little connection to the curriculum or the particular challenges they face in the classroom.\textsuperscript{14}

Why don’t most teachers have more opportunities to learn things that will allow them to improve? As with many things in the field of education, we can identify effective strategies that have been used by some schools to improve instruction, but when it comes to bringing these effective strategies to many schools, or even all schools, the path is much less clear.
There are different ways of taking something that works for a school and bringing it up to scale. The top-down approach would be to design a program of effective teacher development from the district office and to use the power and resources of that office to install this model in all schools. The decentralized approach would shun teacher development efforts at the district level, instead leave all planning and implementation up to individual schools, and focus on getting principals who will provide high-quality learning opportunities for their staff. Which of these approaches is right for districts in the age of standards-based reform? To identify the strengths and weaknesses of the different approaches, it helps to break the capacity-building strategy down into its components.

Components of the strategy

Any capacity-building strategy that is focused on improving instruction will have four components: 1) identifying the goals, 2) choosing an effective instructional method or methods that will support efforts to achieve the goals, 3) coaching all teachers in those effective instructional methods, and 4) ensuring that all teachers are using effective instructional methods. Districts and schools bring relative advantages and disadvantages to these different tasks. In this section, I will offer some thoughts about the advantages and disadvantages of the decentralized and top-down approaches to each of these components. Then I analyze Houston’s major capacity-building efforts, looking at the same four components for each effort, and analyze what Houston’s experience shows about the advantages and disadvantages of the decentralized and top-down approaches.
Identifying goals: top-down approach vs. decentralized approach

Coming up with goals is partly a matter of diagnosing shortcomings using student achievement data and other measures, and partly a matter of picking priorities. Under the top-down approach, the district can bring a capacity to analyze data and identify areas of weakness, a capacity which many schools may lack. However, while there will be issues that affect nearly all schools in a district to an equal degree, there will also be a large number of school-specific difficulties, and these make it problematic to force all schools to focus on identical goals.

Under the decentralized approach, schools can diagnose their own weaknesses and focus on the needs of their own students. The decentralized approach may have an advantage here, but there is a danger that leaving goals up to individual schools will lead to unevenness and inequity.

Choosing effective instructional methods: top-down approach vs. decentralized approach

Districts and schools both have a history of bad mistakes in choosing instructional methods. If the district has the capacity to make wise decisions with regard to instructional methods, then the popularity of flawed methods suggests the need to make these decisions at the district level occasionally, and impose them on schools to ensure that independence doesn’t cause schools to go astray. Where there is more than one right answer and few popular, yet ineffective, methods, it probably makes sense to leave decisions up to schools, but districts should always insist that schools use methods that are research-based. This may argue for at least some top-down management.
Bringing effective methods to teachers: top-down approach vs. decentralized approach

Districts may bring certain advantages to the task of coaching teachers in more effective instructional methods. They can take advantage of economies of scale and hire high-priced experts to serve as consultants and to develop materials that can be distributed to every school. Districts can also more easily promote collaboration among teachers and principals in different schools, hire specialists to work with teachers in several schools, and help schools share information about effective strategies.\textsuperscript{15}

Under the decentralized approach, schools can team up to do many of the same things, but they are probably less likely to do this. Teachers can also learn from other teachers in their school and from experts hired by the school to address particular areas of difficulty encountered by the school. Under this heading, which approach has the edge is unclear.

Ensuring that all teachers use effective methods: top-down approach vs. decentralized approach

Getting teachers to change what they do, not just showing teachers how things could be done differently, is a challenge under either the decentralized or the top-down approach. Reform has to reach many teachers who are not eager to change, who cannot merely be entreated to change, and who are convinced that it is impossible to do things differently.\textsuperscript{16}

One way to inspire teachers to adopt the effective practices that they have been shown is to insist that teachers demonstrate results. Under the decentralized approach, a principal might insist that teachers produce a certain amount of learning in their pupils
(measured by a gain in test scores, perhaps), or suffer consequences, which could range from intensive retraining and mentoring to losing one’s job. In many places, however, collective bargaining agreements make it extremely difficult to replace teachers who are ineffective. Even where teachers are on shorter-term contracts, there seems to be a reluctance in the culture of many schools to remove teachers whose students are not learning enough. Districts could use a top-down approach to identify ineffective teachers (perhaps using value-added analysis) and remove them from schools, most districts are unlikely to embrace this approach.

Other methods besides the threat of punishment can be used to get teachers to change what they do in the classroom. Figuring out how to inspire reluctant teachers to adopt new instructional techniques brings us back to ground that is covered in the literature on effective schools and on high-quality teacher development. Research suggests that real change is most likely to occur when teachers have opportunities for observation, critique and collaboration with colleagues built into their daily routines.

Because a principal would be able to introduce learning opportunities into the daily routine of teachers more easily than a superintendent would, the decentralized approach might have an advantage here. A principal can also more easily carve out the time and promote the culture that are needed to overcome the isolation of teachers.

Of course, most principals don’t do this today, so the top-down approach may be necessary. It is certainly not impossible for districts to play an active role in convincing teachers to adopt new instructional techniques, as researchers studying effective districts have found. In these districts, superintendents create a sense of urgency about meeting high standards and create a focus on instruction and student performance. They also
initiate changes in curriculum and teaching strategies, actively monitor instruction in
classrooms and schools, and actively dismiss principals on the basis of their
performance. While it may seem strange to imagine a district controlling the inner
workings of a school to this degree, it is not unprecedented. Houston’s experience may
shed light on the advantages and disadvantages of the two approaches to this stage of
capacity building, as well as to the other three stages.

**Capacity-Building by a School District: How Three HISD Initiatives Measure Up**

In the following pages, three of HISD’s main efforts to boost teaching and learning are examined. For each, I provide a brief history and then analyze the four different components described above: identifying goals, choosing an effective method, bringing the effective methods to teachers, and ensuring that teachers use effective methods. The focus will be on evaluating where HISD’s approach falls in the spectrum ranging from decentralized (school control) to top-down (district control) and assessing whether the decisions made by HISD in this regard seem to have been the right ones.

**Reading initiative**

In 1995, one fourth of fifth graders and one third of sixth graders in Houston failed the TAAS reading test. The low reading scores of HISD students were a matter of great concern to Dr. Paige and the local business community.

Paige quickly convened a PEER (Peer Examination, Evaluation, and Redesign) task force and charged it with developing a research-based approach to reading for the district and a plan for implementing the program in all schools. The approach was to deal with
the “reading wars” by bringing together proponents of different methods of instruction, having them consult with outside experts, and asking them to agree on a recommendation for the entire district.

The work of the PEER committee was completed May 3, 1996. The committee produced an 85-page report called “A Balanced Approach to Reading.” Despite the word “balanced,” the new philosophy would mean a significant shift away from whole language to phonics. “Balance does not mean mindless eclecticism,” the report warned; “balance involves a program that combines skills involving phonological awareness and decoding with language and literature-rich activities.”22 This approach would be in line with the state’s approach to reading instruction; Texas has adopted a policy on early reading instruction that is more explicit about phonics and more compatible with reading science than any other state’s.23

The PEER report identified the critical components of a reading program for elementary, middle and high schools. It recommended that all teachers in the district be trained in the balanced approach to reading, that professional development be ongoing, and that principals be charged with ensuring that the reading program was fully implemented in their schools.

An implementation plan was developed and the 1996-97 budget included $3.2 million to launch it. Training began in the fall of 1996, and by the summer of 2000 it had reached almost 12,000 teachers.24 In the first year, over 3,300 K-3 teachers received five days of training in the balanced approach from 150 trainers. Special training programs were held for principals and for reading enrichment teachers. The next year, new training was developed to meet the needs of teachers of grades 4-6, and these teachers were given
three days of training. Every secondary teacher received training in reading instruction during a district in-service day. The district trains all new teachers, elementary and secondary, in the balanced approach.

The twelve administrative districts within HISD hired reading teacher trainers to provide ongoing support for teachers. These trainers spend most of their time in schools, working with teachers individually and in small groups. HISD holds monthly meetings with reading teacher trainers to go over strengths and weaknesses that are turning up districtwide and in individual schools and to discuss what to do about them.

The district has aimed to create a cadre of people with reading expertise in the schools themselves. Most elementary schools have lead reading teachers, some of which are funded using federal Title I and class size reduction dollars.

HISD attempts to address reading problems proactively instead of remedially. The district requires all elementary schools to spend 90 minutes per day on reading instruction, and schools assess students early and often to identify problems and potential problems. Results from the Stanford 9, Aprenda (a nationally-normed test in Spanish) and TAAS reading subtests are analyzed to determine which objectives are not being mastered by HISD students. While the reading initiative is now almost five years old, HISD’s focus on reading continues to be strong.

**Analysis of reading initiative**

*Identifying goals*

Given the high rate of failure on the TAAS reading test, and given that teaching children to read is arguably the most important thing schools do, it is hard to quibble with
the district for using the top-down approach to make reading improvement a key goal for
the district. While HISD has chosen the broad goal of improving reading instruction,
schools focus on whichever reading difficulties affect their students; they need not move
in lock step. Principals and teachers have access to a lot of data about which objectives
their students are mastering on standardized tests, so they can identify areas of reading
that require additional attention in their school or classroom. This hybrid approach, with
the district setting broad goals and schools focusing on individual weaknesses, seems
ideal.

Choosing effective instructional methods

The district made an explicit decision to adopt the top-down approach when it came
to reading. While district leadership was pushing to decentralize many of its operations
and decision-making, Paige determined that reading instruction would have to be an
exception. The idea that the district needed to adopt a single, uniform approach to
reading instruction grew out of one of the superintendent’s monthly meetings with the
teachers who had been elected teacher-of-the-year on each campus. These teachers told
the superintendent that the high mobility rate of children around the district would
prevent reading scores from improving unless there was a consistent approach to reading
across the district, so that students who changed schools would not receive bits and
pieces of different methods of instruction.28

While the district has insisted that all teachers and schools adopt the “balanced”
approach to reading, schools are given considerable flexibility in the instructional
methods they use so long as they put instruction in phonics front and center. The district
describes its approach as a philosophy, not a package that is delivered to the door of schools.

   Given the continued popularity of flawed approaches to reading in many schools and districts and the challenges posed by a mobile student body, it seems wise of the district to have limited school autonomy when it came to reading instruction.

Bringing effective methods to teachers

   HISD has mobilized a large number of specialists to bring effective methods of reading instruction to teachers. The reading teacher trainers, who visit schools and classrooms to ensure that the principles of the balanced approach are being put into practice, are key players. Trainers are typically each responsible for a handful of schools. They work most intensively with new teachers (especially alternatively certified teachers), teachers who request extra help, and those whose principals have requested extra help on their behalf. The trainers may observe a teacher and offer suggestions, teach model lessons, or work with small groups of children needing special help. The high turnover rate for teachers in some HISD schools means that teacher trainers are generally kept very busy supporting new teachers.

   Some schools have adopted comprehensive reform models that include all of the components of the balanced approach to reading, such as Success for All. Schools using Success for All each have a facilitator who is responsible for visiting classrooms to be sure the program is being implemented properly, and then meeting with teachers individually to discuss changes. There are also meetings for teams of teachers focusing on different components of the Success for All program in each school.
Teachers in HISD also have access to a wide range of cafeteria-style professional development offerings, and there are many different courses on particular aspects of the balanced approach to reading. The administrative districts develop training sessions on topics requested by the schools. All of the district’s offerings are free to teachers, and every teacher must accumulate a total of 45 hours of professional development credits each year.

HISD has also used textbook adoption to reinforce the emphasis on phonics. Beginning in 2000-2001, almost the entire district will use the Open Court reading program, a well-known program that includes explicit phonics instruction as an essential component.29

Has the dissemination strategy been effective? It would be impossible to miss the emphasis on systematic instruction in phonics in HISD schools. When interviewed, more than one teacher rattled off the six components of the balanced approach to reading.

The research and accountability division of HISD has evaluated the reading initiative yearly to assess its impact. These evaluations have included structured interviews with principals and teachers to determine the extent to which the balanced approach to reading has been implemented.30 The studies have found that principals and teachers are focused on improving reading instruction and have attended training related to the balanced approach to reading; teachers in some schools noted the involvement of their principals in reading instruction as one of the changes brought about by the district’s initiative.31

The district has been proactive about getting effective strategies for reading instruction into the hands of teachers, and the strategy seems to have worked. By training experts who spend lots of time in the schools, the district has shrunk the distance between
the central office and individual teachers. This has not prevented schools from pursuing their own efforts to improve instruction when they have felt it necessary. The district has taken advantage of economies of scale to do something which would likely be too expensive for individual schools under the decentralized approach.

*Ensuring that all teachers use effective methods*

Because the components of the balanced approach to reading are fairly distinctive and easy to identify, it is possible to learn something about the extent to which teachers are using scientifically based literacy instruction by watching them teach. While all teachers are supposed to be observed as part of the state’s teacher assessment system, the reading initiative (and programs like Success for All) have created an environment which makes observation and monitoring a normal part of daily life for teachers.

This contrasts with a typical school district, where teachers are observed once or twice a year, usually with plenty of advance warning (which is often required by the collective bargaining agreement). Such teachers can put on a great show for observers, who will then have no idea of what a more typical classroom performance is for that teacher.

When a school uses a program like Success for All, however, teachers become accustomed to having facilitators come in and out of their classrooms to observe and to deliver model lessons. HISD’s reading initiative has made the same thing happen in schools that aren’t using a comprehensive school reform model. This has turned out to be a very effective way of producing school-level change from the top down. By making observation and advice a part of the teacher’s normal routine, particularly through the use
of reading teacher trainers, the district has made it easier to pinpoint the use of ineffective teaching practice and to help struggling teachers improve.

Measuring the effect of the reading initiative (or any other initiative) on student achievement is difficult. Because the district has embarked on so many different reforms at the same time, it is hard to identify the impact of any one effort. If the percentage of HISD students passing the TAAS reading test increases, is this due to the balanced approach to reading, or to the incentives provided by the accountability system? If the percentage of HISD students passing the TAAS reading test declines, is this because the reading initiative is misguided or because more students with limited English proficiency or learning disabilities are being included in the testing program? With these caveats in mind, the data are worth examining.

Figure 1 shows the trends in TAAS passing rates in reading for elementary, middle, and high school students between 1995 and 2000.\textsuperscript{32}

Figure 1. Trends in passing rate on TAAS reading test
With minor exceptions, passing rates increased throughout the entire period, more steadily at the elementary level than elsewhere. Elementary, middle and high school students started off at roughly the same level in reading, but elementary school students are today doing much better than middle school students, and slightly better than high school students. Something is working better at the elementary school level than at higher grades. This could be the balanced approach to reading, but it could be something else, for instance the accountability system.33

At the beginning of the period under investigation, the average elementary school had 50 percent of its students passing the TAAS reading test.34 By the end of the period, the average school had 68.5 percent of students passing the test. An average improvement of 18.5 points is quite impressive. Figure 2 shows the distribution of elementary schools based on the percentage of students passing the reading test at the beginning of the period under investigation and at the end. Impressive as the gains have been, there are still schools where fewer than 40 percent of students are able to pass the TAAS reading test, and the gap between the least effective and most effective schools remains large.
While the figure shows a shift of the bell-shaped distribution, it obscures the fact that there was great variation in the amount of improvement shown by individual schools. While the average gain was 18.5 points, one school gained 50 points in this period and one school saw its passing rate drop 30 points.

Figure 3. Range of gains in reading found in different elementary schools
Figure 3 shows how much variation there was in the amount of improvement shown by seventeen different schools during this period. (Each point in Figure 3 represents one school.) These schools all started out with passing rates between 35 and 40 percent. Four of these schools showed gains of more than 40, three schools showed gains of 10 or less, and the rest of the schools are scattered in between.

This points to the importance of school-level factors in ensuring that teachers use effective methods, and makes clear that a district-led approach can only go so far. A 1999-2000 evaluation conducted by the district’s research and accountability department found that principals in high-performing schools were more articulate about the goals of the reading initiative, and teachers in these schools were more able to discuss the components of the balanced approach to reading and how they were implementing them in their daily lessons, than were principals and teachers in low-performing schools.\textsuperscript{35}

When asked how involved the principal is in reading instruction, teachers gave me a wide range of responses. In some schools, principals spend a good deal of time observing teachers and know which ones are struggling. In other schools, principals are less involved. “It’s not that she doesn’t care, but she is very busy,” one teacher told me about his principal.

Good principals have different ways of motivating teachers to change long-established habits. One principal who managed to raise reading scores significantly in his school told me that he made a decision to test every child instead of exempting some (even before this became HISD’s approach in 1999). Once teachers had to ensure that every child would pass the test, they became more interested in learning new instructional
strategies, the principal said. Those who would or could not improve were terminated. Gradually, conversations in the building changed, as teachers became interested in effective strategies for reading instruction.

Not all principals are this focused on reading instruction. Not all are as quick to rid their school of underperforming teachers. But the district’s accountability system can sometimes create a bottom line even when a principal has not. While threats alone may not be a good basis for running a district, if teachers know that they are being held accountable for results in tangible ways, they are more likely to make difficult changes.

When asked how his school had managed to turn itself around and boost reading scores significantly after being identified as low-performing, one teacher responded “we had to,” or else face the possibility of reconstitution. It was a greater concentration and extra effort that made the difference in the school that turned itself around.

The district’s aggressive outreach strategy, the energy of individual schools, and the accountability system all interact to lead teachers in some schools to more eagerly embrace new instructional methods than teachers in other schools. It is unlikely that any of these three factors would have the same effect in isolation.

**Math Initiative**

The math initiative was launched in the fall of 1995. The previous spring, only 49.3 percent of students in HISD passed the TAAS math test. The superintendent was concerned about low math scores, particularly at the middle school level; only 35.7 percent of eighth graders had passed the test. Dr. Paige asked his staff to examine the transcripts of all middle school math teachers in the district to determine how many math
courses they had taken. He was troubled to find that many teachers lacked adequate preparation in math—40 percent had taken fewer than twelve credit hours of math—and he concluded that the district would have to teach math to some of its math teachers.\textsuperscript{36}

The initiative began as a series of university courses and summits (full- or half-day meetings filled with workshops for all math teachers in particular clusters of grades) for teachers and principals. The math summits included approximately 50 workshops on a variety of topics. Summits were typically attended by 900-1000 teachers in the first year.

Algebra teachers were offered the option of a course designed and offered by Rice University called Topics in Contemporary Algebra for Teachers, and roughly 30 algebra teachers took the course each semester. Their tuition was paid by HISD and the teachers received graduate credit for the course.\textsuperscript{37}

In the second year of the math initiative (1996-97), several shorter courses were added. Teachers could take after-school mini-courses which focused on TAAS math objectives for particular grades. Six-day TEXTEAM courses, which were offered on afternoons and weekends during the school year, covered all strands of the math curriculum for a cluster of grades. The math summits, university course, TEXTEAM training sessions, and TAAS mini-courses all continue to be offered.

In 1997-98, the district launched an algebra initiative as an offshoot of the math initiative. At that time, Texas required all students to take algebra in order to graduate, but only 15 percent of students in HISD passed the state end-of-course exam in the spring of 1997 (compared with an almost-as-low 18.3 percent of students passing statewide). In 2003, the end-of-course exam will be eliminated and algebra will be integrated into the
TAAS exit-level exam, which means that all students will need to have mastered algebra in order to graduate.\textsuperscript{38}

As a first step, a districtwide syllabus was developed so that the state’s expectations in algebra would be clear to students and teachers. This marked a major change for most teachers, who had been accustomed to basing their instruction on the textbook. When the first end-of-course exam results for algebra were released in 1996, it was a rude awakening for HISD.\textsuperscript{39} While the state exam was based on the assumption that algebra was taught as a functions-based course, that was not the focus of the textbook that the district had been using for the last six years.

The district quickly mobilized to change the way algebra was taught. School-level planning teams were organized for all Algebra I teachers (from high schools and middle schools) and a district-wide meeting was held (at first weekly, later monthly) for a representative from each team. The goals were to increase teacher knowledge about the skills that were covered by the new TEKS and tested on the algebra end-of-course exam, and to provide support for teachers in the use of new teaching methods.

Beginning in the second year of the algebra initiative (1998-99), schools were asked to send a sample of student work to the district office each month to demonstrate the implementation of improved instruction. A district math supervisor prepared a report for each principal every 2-3 months on the degree to which the school’s teachers were focusing their instruction on higher-level skills (in addition to information about which teachers are attending the meetings and turning in work); teachers received feedback on this as well.\textsuperscript{40}
After two years, the district stopped running weekly meetings for school coordinators, and schools are no longer required to hold weekly meetings for their planning teams. Instead, unsuccessful algebra teachers (those for whom fewer than 15 percent of students passed the end-of-course exam last year) will be pulled out of their classes for eight days of in-depth training.

The algebra initiative was also extended to middle school teachers who weren’t teaching algebra. Test results showed that students entering middle school were strong in computational skills but weak in problem solving and the application of mathematical concepts, which are prerequisites for success in algebra. School planning teams were introduced in middle schools so that teachers could work together to develop instructional plans based on the TEKS. School coordinators attended weekly training sessions throughout the school year to learn about activities that would support the algebra strand of the new TEKS in middle schools. School coordinators also attended a Rice University course called Contemporary Topics in Middle School Mathematics so that they would be more knowledgeable as team leaders.

In the second year of the program, middle school math teachers continued to meet to discuss learning plans. Teachers turned in samples of student work to the district, just as the algebra teachers had done the previous year. District coordinators found that many of these samples did not reflect the concept-based syllabus that the initiative was meant to foster; some teachers continued to progress through the textbook page by page. Since the implementation of the new approach was so mixed, the district extended the initiative for another year.
In 2000-2001, HISD brought the algebra initiative to fifth grade teachers. As in the earlier iterations, the district meets with team coordinators (this time for clusters of elementary schools, not individual schools) to go through the 5th grade texts, group the skills into concepts, and talk about how to work on problem-solving skills. There is an emphasis on patterns and algebraic thinking.

Math Initiative - Analysis

Identifying goals

As with reading, math is so central that it is hard to second guess a school district for using its power to get schools to focus on it. The district is not alone in emphasizing, within the math initiative, the importance of preparing students for success in algebra. School districts and states around the country are grappling with the issue of how to increase the number of students who pass that gate-keeping subject. Because the demand that all students master algebra ultimately comes from the state, the district has not so much chosen a goal as identified a need for extra work in the area of preparation for algebra.

How to strengthen the preparation of HISD students for algebra is not so clear. In HISD, internal analysis showed that students were mastering basic skills but struggling when it came to higher-order thinking skills. In an interview, though, a teacher told me that the reason her students were unable to pass the algebra end-of-course exam is that they don’t have the preparation to master algebra from elementary and middle school math. Her students are still struggling with word problems and with fractions and percentages.
Ensuring that students have mastered these skills before embarking on algebra is imperative. While asking all students to master algebra is a worthy goal for the state to have chosen, many schools in the state have a lot of prior ground to cover to make the goal a realistic one.

Choosing effective instructional methods

As in reading, math is home to a great debate. To oversimplify, the old-fashioned approach to math was focused on the development of basic skills through repetition and the gradual acquisition of more advanced facts and skills. The contemporary approach advocated by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (NCTM), among others, emphasizes the use of math to solve problems rather than the development of basic skills.

As in reading, HISD has aimed for balance and tried to incorporate both basic computational skills and mathematical reasoning in its math instruction, at least in part because this is the state’s approach. “The TAAS objectives are not basic computation, they involve reasoning, so a strict back-to-basics approach will not be enough,” an administrator told me. Because most teachers in the district are more comfortable teaching math the old-fashioned way, HISD has sought to identify effective techniques for teaching students how to apply basic skills to real world problems. Since solid basic skills are also a prerequisite for more advanced work in math, schools will have to ensure that they are getting the balance right between basic and applied skills. The differing needs of students in different schools may argue for allowing schools more autonomy in selecting instructional methods.
The district has not attempted to shape math instruction nearly as actively as reading. Rather, it has tried to identify techniques that enable teachers to remedy instructional weaknesses, and while HISD has made it very convenient for teachers to learn these techniques, in the end, decisions about how to teach math are made by teachers and schools, not the district. Teachers pick which professional development courses to take, and they may or may not pick courses emphasizing applied skills. Of all the different pieces of the math initiative, the algebra initiative is the most potentially intrusive, but schools may simply choose not to participate if they don’t want the intrusion. Several schools have exercised this option.

**Bringing effective methods to teachers**

The different components of the math initiative reach varying numbers of teachers. An evaluation conducted by the research and accountability department in 1996-97 found that 38-42 percent of targeted teachers attended the full- or half-day math summits that year. Surveys administered to participants in the summits reveal that most got some ideas which they plan to use, though they said that the things they learned will not greatly change the way they teach.43

The district has evaluated the algebra initiative annually and teachers participating in it were surveyed after each of the first two years. The 1999-2000 evaluation reported that the weekly meetings conducted in schools were focused on the algebra scope and sequence and on successful approaches to teaching it, which were among the priorities of the initiative.44 In the 1998-99 survey, 88 percent of teachers said they participated in the school planning-team meetings and 78 percent said these meetings were helpful.45
Eighty-three percent said they had incorporated strategies learned in the planning meetings in their classroom. Thirty-three percent of teachers reported that the principal sometimes attends the school planning-team meetings.

Suggestions for improving the initiative seemed to be split. Some teachers wanted more support and wanted more teachers in their schools to participate in the initiative; a smaller number of teachers believed that fewer, better organized meetings would be a significant improvement, and others wanted matters left to the schools altogether, with no interference from HISD.

The district surveyed middle school team coordinators and teachers during the 1998-99 school year to evaluate how well the initiative was supporting non-algebra teachers. Seventy percent of teachers agreed or strongly agreed that they present better lessons when they attend weekly planning meetings. Fifty-one percent said that they use the instructional plan from the meeting “regularly” or “often.”

Participation in the school-level meetings appears to be lower in middle schools than in high schools. Fifty-eight percent of team coordinators reported that a majority of math teachers on their planning team regularly attend the meetings. Twenty-eight percent of teachers reported that their principal sometimes attends the meetings.

The math initiative, while district-led, is a fairly light-handed approach to bringing new ideas to teachers. While many teachers have been reached by the math summits and courses, these are optional and not particularly intrusive. The algebra initiative was a bit more heavy-handed, and seems to have reached teachers more deeply. The percentage of teachers participating in the initiative and finding it useful were fairly high, though the
survey (and a similar one administered the previous year) showed that not all teachers thought the program was a good use of their time.

Without more information, it is hard to know if those teachers seeking more school control over math instruction are talented teachers who learn new instructional techniques on their own or teachers who are too set in their ways to change. If some are in the latter category, as is most likely the case, then a more top-down approach is a valid way to try to expose teachers to more effective methods.

Ensuring that all teachers use effective methods

If the math initiative was working and teachers were beginning to use more effective instructional techniques in math, we’d expect to see improved pass rates on TAAS for the students of teachers who participated in the more intensive components, at the very least. Unfortunately, the research and accountability department has been unable to look for connections between teacher participation in training opportunities and student achievement because attendance records for the different training sessions are not kept by the central office.\textsuperscript{47}

It is possible to look for the effects of the initiative in the overall trends in passing rates, though the caveats from the analysis in the previous section apply here as well.

Figure 4 shows the trends in TAAS passing rates in math for elementary, middle, and high school students between 1995 and 2000.\textsuperscript{48} With minor exceptions, math passing rates increased fairly steadily throughout the entire period. Elementary students are doing better today than middle and high school students. Gains in math scores have been comparable at the three levels.
Because the algebra initiative was the most intensive component of the math initiative, it would be the one most likely to produce measurable results. The algebra initiative focused first on teachers of algebra (in middle schools and high schools).

Looking at the trends in the passing rate on the algebra end-of-course exam to identify the impact of the algebra initiative is complicated by the fact that there were changes in the population taking the test during the same period. Algebra has been a statewide requirement for graduation since 1996. Students must take and pass the course, but they need not pass the end-of-course exam to receive credit. The end-of-course exam became a required part of the student’s course grade as a matter of district policy during the 1998-99 school year.

Figure 5 shows the trend in the passing rate in middle and high schools for the end-of-course algebra exam. Many more students were taking the test, particularly at the high school level, which would be expected to cause a drop in the pass rate, but the pass rate increased for both middle and high school students during this period. (Even at the end
of the period, the pass rate is not very high, however.) This increase could be because students began taking the test seriously once they knew it would count in their course grades, but it also could be in part because of improvements in instruction linked to the algebra initiative.49

Figure 5. Trends in passing rates for algebra end-of-course exam

Because of the large increase in the number of students taking the algebra exam at the high school level, the small increase in the percentage of students passing the exam translates into a large increase in the number of students passing the exam. Figure 6 shows the trends in the total number of students passing the test.
HISD’s efforts to ensure that more teachers were using effective methods in math seem to have had some success. Getting math teachers to change the way they teach is not a simple undertaking, particularly when asking them to go from teaching basic skills to teaching problem solving and algebraic thinking, with which teachers may not be very comfortable. “There were big changes at the state level with TEKS, and people don’t change easily,” one administrator said. The math summits do bring useful information to teachers, but they most likely don’t cause the kinds of day-to-day changes in instruction that more intensive forms of teacher development—those that are embedded in the daily routine of teachers and involve opportunities for observation and critique—do.

The algebra initiative was an attempt to integrate planning and collaboration into the routine of the school, and thereby cause major changes in what teachers do in the classroom. At both middle and high school levels, the initiative seems to work well for many teachers, but a significant minority of teachers has chosen not to participate. As far as attending the meetings goes, “Some just won’t do it. Some feel it infringes their
academic freedom, some just won’t be bothered,” an administrator told me. While HISD is making a lot of support available to teachers, it is not reaching many teachers who are disinclined to change what they do.

Could HISD do more to ensure that all teachers get appropriate training? The research and accountability department noted in one of its evaluations of the math initiative that site-based management makes it difficult for the central office to ensure that teachers are getting the assistance they need. Asking principals to devote more attention to this is one solution, but many middle and high school principals seem too busy to take this on, or are otherwise disinclined. A number of teachers suggested (in the surveys conducted by the district) that the algebra initiative would have been more effective if only their principal had supported it more or required participation.

This year (2000-2001), HISD has responded by taking matters into its own hands, identifying teachers whose students are not passing the end-of-course exam at acceptable rates and requiring them to have additional training. This goes beyond what one would normally expect a district to do. While there may be grumbling from some teachers, the district is taking on a task that all schools should be handling, but many schools are neglecting. The math teachers that I spoke with reported that while the principal and the chair of the math department in a school see student results on the algebra end-of-course exam sorted by teacher, the results are never discussed with the teachers in a formal way. When teachers are persistently ineffective, an aggressive approach like HISD’s may be wise, though the district has access to much less information than a principal has about the performance of a particular teacher and its possible causes.
Curriculum alignment

In many places where standards-based reform is being implemented, teachers complain that the academic standards are not clear or detailed enough to guide their instructional planning. After learning that his state’s standards were not nearly as specific as they could be, Dr. Paige was inspired to develop more specific guidance for teachers in HISD about what students should know and be able to do at each grade level.

Perhaps because the state’s standards did not contain sufficient detail, they were infrequently used by teachers to plan instruction. In January 1995, HISD had launched an audit to determine whether the district’s written curriculum was aligned with the state’s guidelines and with what was tested by the state, and whether what was actually taught in the district’s classrooms was aligned with any of these. The district found that, for the majority of teachers, the textbook was still the primary resource for instructional planning, rather than the district curriculum or state academic standards.

The district proceeded to examine its textbooks to determine the degree to which these were aligned with the curriculum. This was an eye-opening experience, in the words of one administrator. Many of the textbooks were poorly aligned with the curriculum, it was found, and not surprisingly, when the district’s test scores were examined objective-by-objective, students were discovered to have done well in areas where the textbooks were strong and to have performed poorly in other areas.

In response to the shortcomings in the curriculum and its relationship to the state’s standards, the district launched an effort to provide much more detailed information to teachers about the material they should cover. When Texas adopted a new set of curricular objectives (TEKS) in 1997, HISD decided that this would be a good
opportunity to change its curriculum. The district launched Project CLEAR (Clarifying Learning to Enhance Achievement Results) as a way of establishing uniform standards for student learning across the district and clarifying instruction across grade levels and subject areas. The product is a binder containing an annotated scope and sequence for each grade level or course. For each objective, teachers are given detailed information about what content should be taught to meet the objective, the level of knowledge that has been developed in earlier grades, assessment ideas that can be used to determine if the student has mastered the objective, and ways the skills covered by the objective can be linked to other objectives.

Since the Project CLEAR materials were first developed, the district has actively trained teachers in their use. One teacher in each content area in each school receives special training during a five-day summer institute, and the district also does training sessions in curricular materials for administrative district staff.

**Curriculum Alignment -- Analysis**

*Identifying goals*

Choosing curriculum alignment as a goal for the district was not uncontroversial. When HISD first began talking of curriculum alignment, some people saw this as an attempt to cheat, that is, to teach to the test, a manager in the curriculum department told me. Today this is understood very differently, she said, as the only fair thing for kids. “We want every child in every school to have the opportunity to have a quality curriculum so they can be successful,” another HISD administrator told me. The introduction of a common curriculum is explicitly aimed at equity. “The superintendent
feels strongly about all kids achieving academic success; if each teacher decides what the kids can handle, this complicates things,” the administrator said.

While the district’s centralized approach may seem heavy-handed, insisting that all children be taught what the state expects them to learn is an essential element of standards-based reform. Since this goal has been chosen by the state, it would not be a matter of local autonomy even if Houston chose not to embrace it so warmly. Given the history of poor children being taught a watered-down curriculum instead of challenged to reach high standards, Houston’s emphasis on this goal makes sense.

Choosing effective instructional methods

If the goal is to ensure that instruction is aligned with the state curriculum and test, then identifying an effective approach means avoiding the twin dangers of dumbing-down the curriculum and teaching to the test.

Responding to critics who say that the TEKS standards will cause a dumbing-down of the curriculum, one administrator told me “TAAS is the floor, but we’re trying to make sure that the schools aren’t spending all of their time on the floor, that they are enriching their curriculum. Some of our best schools said that they don’t want to give up on what they are doing, but no educated child will fail TAAS. These schools do not need to prepare children for the test. Well-educated children will do well without preparation.”

Teaching to the test is an oft-raised charge under standards-based reform. This phrase can be understood in two ways. In one sense, if there are clear standards setting forth what children should learn and an aligned test measures whether students have mastered this material, then one would hope that some of that material would find its way
into the classroom! Of course, not all of the material in the standards will be tested, and some teachers may focus on only the knowledge and skills that will appear on the test, or may give their students only exercises that resemble test questions. Whether this kind of practice is a bad thing depends on the quality of the test.

To a non-expert, TAAS appears to test a very wide range of skills in a variety of ways.53 “I don’t think that you can do well on the test by simply knowing how to take the test. You must know the content,” Dr. Paige argues.54

In the end, HISD has used a fairly light-handed approach in its selection of this approach; most of the pressure on teachers to align their instruction with the curriculum comes from the accountability system. Greater school autonomy in this area would not be desirable unless the standards were shown to be poor.

**Bringing effective methods to teachers**

The Project CLEAR curricular materials are the culmination of many years of work in curriculum alignment. In studies conducted by HISD’s research and accountability division during the first two years of the initiative (1996-97 and 1997-8), teachers reported that they found the assorted materials provided by the district for instructional planning very useful. One year later, when Project CLEAR materials had begun to be distributed to teachers, some teachers reported that the materials were not concise and did not provide enough specific information, but by 1999-2000 teachers had become more familiar with the materials, and the majority judged them clear, easy-to-use, and helpful for planning lessons.
In 1998-1999, the research and accountability department conducted in-depth interviews with 126 teachers about the materials they used to plan instruction. The researchers found that, for elementary and high school teachers, textbooks were still the most frequently cited source of guidance for instructional planning, not the curricular materials provided by the district. The district’s 1999-2000 evaluation found that the Project CLEAR materials had become the main source of guidance for elementary teachers when planning a lesson.

In interviews, every teacher I spoke with said that he or she found Project CLEAR materials useful. New teachers said they use it frequently, and are likely to try out the strategies and activities suggested; older teachers use it to make sure they are aware of changes in the curriculum.

Developing the Project CLEAR materials would have been far too expensive for an individual school (or even for most normal-sized districts), and this might have deterred a more decentralized approach to providing teachers with the resources they need to align their instruction with the curriculum.

Ensuring that all teachers use effective methods

While many teachers report that they find the Project CLEAR materials helpful and use them frequently, that is not a very good measure of whether teachers are actually aligning their instruction to the standards. The best measure of whether teachers are teaching the curriculum is how students perform on TAAS. Of course, many other factors influence TAAS scores, but covering the proper material in class would seem to be a necessary condition.
It is hard to separate the effect of curriculum alignment efforts from the broader effect of the standards-and-accountability reforms. Teachers in the district seemed to have somewhat mixed feelings about both. While there is no shortage of teachers who say that there is too much emphasis on TAAS, the regime of standards and tests seems to have grown on many teachers. “You have to set standards. You have to give everyone something to strive for,” one teacher said.

When asked in a survey to name effective ways of preparing students for TAAS, principals listed vertical alignment meetings for teachers (i.e. meetings between teachers in adjoining grades), preparing students for the test beginning early the school year, student motivational activities like pep rallies, and parent and community involvement.57

Providing teachers with time to work together during the school day is one way of encouraging the use of effective teaching methods and a focus on the curriculum. Forty-six schools in the district have received waivers this year which allow them to extend the school day by a few minutes four days a week and then have early dismissal once a week. This gives the teachers more time for grade-level planning and vertical planning.

As in the reading initiative, the curriculum alignment initiative has the power to improve instruction partly by making what happens in the classroom the subject of discussion and critique. In an ordinary classroom, it may be impossible for anyone to monitor the progress an individual teacher is making through the curriculum because the curriculum itself is so flexible. Project CLEAR makes openness and monitoring possible, partly by making it crystal clear what a teacher should be covering, and partly by making explicit the links between what one teacher does and what other teachers are doing.
In the case of the curriculum alignment initiative, the district functions purely as an enabler. The district office cannot do much to ensure that individuals teacher are aligning their daily instruction to the required curriculum, but it is providing teachers with resources that make it much easier for them to do so. These same resources make it possible for school-level leaders to influence what is taught by individual teachers. Ultimately, school-level action will be required to take advantage of these opportunities.

Conclusion

Houston’s attempt to carve a middle road in its efforts to improve instruction, one between district-directed change and absolute school autonomy, reveals some interesting and unexpected things about the advantages and disadvantages of different approaches to building teacher capacity.

With regard to identifying goals, the district has picked its priorities in a way that has not limited the options of schools excessively. In identifying effective instructional methods, Houston acted aggressively in the field of reading, but made its approach to math instruction less rigid and more decentralized. In bringing effective methods of instruction to teachers, the district’s energetic approach seemed effective in reading, and seemed to be quickly gaining acceptance in curriculum alignment, but encountered some obstacles in math, in the form of resistance to the intrusion among a minority of teachers. There was little evidence of school-level energy on this front, though, so the district’s approach was probably smart, though this does beg the question (as do all of the district’s efforts) of whether providing so much assistance to schools can make them lazy—and greedy.
The hardest part of capacity building is not identifying goals, finding effective instructional methods, or getting information about these methods to teachers, but getting teachers to change what they do every single day. Houston’s experience shows that this can be as difficult for school-level leaders to accomplish as it is for distant school districts.

While HISD made enormous efforts to ensure that its teachers were using effective methods, there were limits to what it could accomplish. In reading, the district’s efforts were effective only in combination with school-level leadership and the statewide accountability system. In algebra, the district acted to encourage teachers to teach in a more effective way because it spotted a problem that individual schools were not addressing. While the effort is impressive, it is hard to evaluate its success in changing classroom practice. In curriculum alignment, the district’s approach has created opportunities for real change in practice, but it might take more school-level initiative to deliver success.

Overcoming the barriers to changing what teachers do will require a transformation in the culture of schools. Paige pointed out in an interview that in the past, both what a child should learn and how to know if the material has been mastered were left up to the discretion of each teacher in the district. Every job has prescribed elements and discretionary elements, but the discretionary piece in teaching got too large, he believes. Teachers came to see themselves as private practitioners, and many of them are now reluctant to give up what they see as their professional prerogative to decide what to teach and how to teach it, Paige observes.
Opening up classrooms to outsiders is the first step in changing the role of teachers. In *Building a New Structure for School Leadership*, a work that Paige mentions as having influenced his thinking on the balance between what the district can do and what schools can do, Richard Elmore notes that “schools and systems that are improving directly and explicitly confront the issue of isolation…they adjust and adapt the routines of the workplace…” so that everyone’s practice is “subject to observation, analysis, and critique.”

What the reading, math, and curriculum alignment initiatives share is that they open up the classroom door and subject the teacher’s daily practice to scrutiny and analysis. In HISD, teachers are no longer private practitioners who choose what and how to teach.

While the three initiatives all make that possible, each initiative embodies a very different approach to the exercise of power by a school district. In the case of reading instruction, Houston has taken a decision out of the hands of teachers and provided an answer of its own. The district allows teachers some flexibility in how they teach, but teachers are not free to attempt to teach reading without phonics. In math, the district has attempted to improve instruction not by setting a course for schools, but by creating live opportunities for schools to build capacity. In curriculum alignment, the district has simply made resources available to teachers and schools.

Houston’s approach is to focus strongly on outcomes, but to allow exceptions—to provide clear direction to schools from the district, but only when this seems required. This approach reminds us that standards-based reform is a theory, but that in the real world, compromises are often necessary. In reading, Dr. Paige was convinced that instruction had to be consistent across schools, so the district limited the freedom of
schools and teachers to do as they please. On other matters, the district left decisions to principals, while making tools and opportunities for capacity building available.

How has HISD managed to make its distinctive strategy work? One key has been Rod Paige, whose school board made him the nation’s highest paid superintendent in spring 2000. Paige has shown great wisdom in identifying areas of practice which may require central control. His method is to seek out the best advice he can find and then follow it. He is also an inspiring leader, and any visitor to the district will be struck by the degree to which Paige’s own goals for the school district, which are shared by his reform-minded board, seem to have entered the hearts and minds of nearly everyone in the system. Also worthy of note is the district’s willingness to be guided by the evidence on matters both large and small. The district collects mountains of data and analyzes everything that moves.

Taking the middle path between making all decisions centrally and leaving everything to individual schools is not an approach with which purists will be comfortable. In particular, those who envision principals as CEOs will bristle at the idea of so much outside interference in classroom practice. In reading, math, and curriculum alignment, Dr. Paige and his staff identified key issues that needed to be addressed and responded boldly. The district was willing to flex its muscles when necessary, but has thus far not yielded to the temptation to make many other decisions for schools. This approach is certainly not for the faint of heart; if a district makes bad decisions about when to intervene, it could be dangerous for good schools that are doing well on their own. But given the reality of the schools we have now and the staff we have in them, Houston’s balanced approach to the role of the district seems a good bet.
Notes

1 “Houston Story; How one school district rose from the dead,” *Dallas Morning News* editorial, September 10, 2000.
2 Data from Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System reports, downloaded from Texas Education Association web site [www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/).
3 For each of the three groups, the percentage of students passing the reading test increased by over 15 percentage points between 1995 and 2000, and the percentage of students passing the math test increased by over 30 points. Since state and district policy changes during that period have reduced the numbers of limited English proficient and special education students who are exempt from the test (and thus the percentage of students tested has risen), the district’s gains are undoubtedly understated by the data. (Beginning in 1999, HISD began including all special education students who took grade-level exams and all children classified as limited English proficient except those who have been in US schools for less than one year and are identified as beginning language learners.) These gains were also posted at a time when the percentage of low-income children in the district was rising from 58 percent to 71 percent. (source: Tyce Palmaffy, “Is Houston Model for Urban Schools? New Mind-Set, Culture Spur Rebound,” *Investor’s Business Daily*, May 26, 2000.)
4 Schools and districts are rated based on the combined performance of all students in the district (or school), as well as for each student group (African American, Hispanic, White, and Economically Disadvantaged (students receiving free or reduced price lunches)), and if the performance of any one group falls below the standard, the district or school receives a lower ranking.
5 In 2000, 87.4 percent of students in the state passed the TAAS test in reading and the same percentage passed the test in math, compared with 76.5 percent in reading and 60.5 percent in math in 1994. Data from Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System reports, downloaded from Texas Education Association web site [www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/).
7 Downloaded from Texas Education Association web site [www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/).
8 TAAS passing rates in 1995 in reading were: El Paso 70.9%, Austin 70.7%, Fort Worth 68.6%, Houston 65.7%, Dallas 59.3%, San Antonio 56.2% and in math were: El Paso 57.5%, Austin 53.3%, Fort Worth 50.3%, Houston 49.3%, Dallas 45.2%, San Antonio 34.8%. TAAS passing rates in 2000 in reading were: Austin 81.2%, Houston 80.9%, El Paso 80.3%, Fort Worth 80.2%, San Antonio 76.6%, Dallas 72.4% and in math were: El Paso 81.3%, Houston 80.6%, Fort Worth 80.0%, Austin 79.5%, San Antonio 76.8%, Dallas 71.3%. Source: Texas Academic Excellence Indicator System reports. Downloaded from Texas Education Association web site [www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/](http://www.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/).
11 McAdams, 131.
new information or caused them to use new teaching strategies and methods, and no effort is generally made to determine whether the students of a teacher who has experienced the training are learning more.

Sparks and Hirsh, “Strengthening Professional Development”; Miles and Guiney, “School Districts’ New Role”


Interview with administrator in Reading Department.

The PEER program—Peer Examination, Evaluation, and Redesign—was a tool used by HISD for dealing with a deep systemic problem. Paige launched PEER task forces made up of community experts, mostly business professionals working on a pro bono basis and district employees, to review major district operations and recommend policy and process changes.

*A Balanced Approach to Reading,* iv.


There are 11,151 teachers in HISD this year.

Most secondary teachers in this country are not trained to teach decoding skills, but the district found that many students were arriving at middle and high school with poor reading skills.

In 2000-2001, there were 177 lead reading teachers.

Since the fall of 1998, the Texas Primary Reading Inventory and the Spanish Primary Reading Inventory have been used to screen students in kindergarten through second grade to identify skills which should be emphasized in staff development workshops.

Interview with district administrator.

Open Court was selected through the normal textbook adoption process, which involves a committee of teachers chaired by HISD’s reading manager making a recommendation to the superintendent. An emphasis on systematic instruction in phonics was at the top of the list of criteria developed by the committee. Schools that have achieved Exemplary status can choose not to use Open Court, but all other schools must use it.


One principal did tell me that, while the balanced approach training offered by the district was an excellent introduction and a critical reform, it didn’t always go far enough. Once teachers in his school mastered the basics, they still needed more strategies to deal with some particular challenges. To help the teachers reach a deeper understanding of literacy, the school has sought out new components on its own, even going so far as to send two staff members to visit a researcher in San Diego who had developed a program for reading comprehension in the middle-elementary grades.

All data used in the figures were supplied by Dr. Kathryn Sanchez, Assistant Superintendent for Research and Accountability in HISD. To simplify the analysis, the passing rate for elementary school students was defined as the passing rate for 4th and 5th graders combined, and the passing rate for middle school students was defined as the passing rate for 7th and 8th graders combined. Statistical analyses of
school productivity have identified negative relationships among the effects seen in adjacent grades. That is, gains at one grade are often followed by declines in the next grade. For this reason, some researchers believe that an average across adjacent grades provides a more accurate measure of effectiveness. (Anthony Bryk, et al., Academic Productivity of Chicago Public Elementary Schools: A Technical Report Sponsored by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (Chicago: Consortium on Chicago School Research, 1998), 28.) The passing rate for high school students was the passing rate for 10th graders; no other high school students take TAAS unless they have already failed the test once.

It is important to note that the passing rates presented here are not the official rates calculated by the district or the state for accountability purposes. In 1999, the district’s rules regarding which students are included in the accountability system were changed so that fewer students would be exempt from the test; this affects HISD’s passing rates in a way that makes comparisons over time using the official statistics invalid. Beginning in 1999, HISD began including all special education students who took grade-level exams and all children classified as limited English proficient (except those who have been in US schools for less than one year and are identified as beginning language learners) in its accountability system. This had the effect of bringing down passing rates. This means that passing rates before and after the change are not strictly comparable, since different populations of students are included in the calculations. The figures presented in this analysis are based on the raw data; a pass rate of 60 percent means that 60 percent of the students in school at the time of the test passed the test. (Using the official statistics, a 60 percent pass rate means that 60 percent of eligible students passed the test.) Even using the raw data, it is still likely that the population of students who were tested changed somewhat over time as the district began to emphasize inclusion. While the passing rates shown here are useful for comparisons within HISD over time, they cannot be used for comparisons with other districts.

It may simply be that it is much more difficult to improve reading skills once students reach middle and high school, and gains in the elementary grades may not translate easily into gains in later grades.

The passing rate for elementary school students is the passing rate for 4th and 5th graders combined. (See note 32 for an explanation.) The beginning of the period under investigation is the average of scores from 1994-95 and 1995-96. The end of the period under investigation is the average of scores from 1998-99 and 1999-2000. I have excluded schools from the alternative district from this analysis.


Source: Interview with district administrator. Nationwide, one third of the secondary -school teachers who teach math did not major or minor in math, math education, or a related field, such as engineering. In high-poverty schools, the figure is 43 percent. Richard Ingersoll, “The Problem of Underqualified Teachers in American Secondary Schools,” Educational Researcher 27, no. 9 (March 1999).

This and other components of the math initiative had their roots in a partnership between the district and Rice which was begun in 1987.

At present, the exit exam only covers 8th grade math.

Interview with district administrator.

Last year, the district added an emphasis on assessment to the initiative. The district prepared a sample assessment that was to be given to students at the end of each concept. These assessments were collected by HISD and returned to school planning teams with comments.


It is unclear whether this is a widespread problem within HISD (or even whether this teacher has correctly diagnosed her students’ problems), but the problem is a common one nationwide. A recent analysis of data from the National Assessment of Educational Progress by Tom Loveless of the Brookings Institution found that American students have lagged in the mastery of basic skills in math. According to this analysis, many thirteen-year-olds have not mastered the fundamentals of arithmetic which would allow them to succeed in algebra, with only 54 percent correctly answering questions relating to fractions, 44 percent correctly answering questions related to integers, and 43 percent correctly answering questions related to percents. Tom Loveless, How Well Are American Students Learning? Focus on Math Achievement (Washington, DC: Brooking Institution, 2000), 19.


“Algebra Initiative Survey Results, 1998-99,” HISD Journal of Educational Reports. The response rate was 72 percent.

The response rate for this survey was 93 percent for team coordinators and 66 percent for teachers.
It could also be because of better math preparation of students in the early grades. Middle school passing rates are higher than high school passing rates because only the best-prepared students take algebra in eighth grade, where it is offered as an honors-level class. All other students take algebra in ninth grade.

Interview with district administrator.

All TAAS tests are available on the internet at http://www.tea.state.tx.us/student.assessment/release/taas/release00/release00.htm. TAAS is scheduled to be replaced by an even more challenging test in 2003.


Some of the same points are made by Richard Elmore in Building a New Structure for School Leadership, The Albert Shanker Institute, Winter 2000, a work that Paige cites has having influenced his thinking.

Elmore, Building a New Structure for School Leadership, p. 32.

Standards-based reform was in some ways the first step in this transformation, since it made what is taught in schools a matter to be decided by the state.
Standards and Curriculum: The school reform goal. State leaders have created standards that specify the content that students need to acquire in each subject area and at each grade level, and have provided curriculum materials that reflect that content. And ranks schools’ performance based on how well students do on basic-skills and standards-based assessments. What’s on the drawing board. California has an established cycle for re-viewing its curriculum expectations. For the most part, California’s approach to standards and curriculum satisfies the NCLB requirements. However, NCLB places a new and heavy emphasis on scientifically proven reading and instructional programs, as certified by the state. Most districts and schools also build in the vision statement to support the direction of the organization. Both the mission and vision process serve as the pillars of school or district-wide systemic change. The strategic plan also summarizes the district’s purpose and operations, what it wants to accomplish, and what it does. It enables them to improve overall school effectiveness, use of resources and capabilities. It provides a blueprint for administrators, school boards, union leaders, businesses, teachers, parents and students to collectively take responsibility for implementing their own improvement efforts. Effective School Achievement Reform 2. towards identifying the knowledge, attitudes and skills necessary for success in the 21st century, the information age. This report was developed by a group of leaders in business, industry, government, and education under the guidance of the Secretary of Labor. In the context of the information-based economy, it is probably more important to be able to identify competencies than to select based on credentials (Bridges, 1994). In fact, learning-to-learn skills will be more important than specific competencies as requirements of work projects change rapidly (Lawler, 1994). Resource-based indicators for educational accountability and school district improvement. Education & Urban Society, 30(4), 479-501. Murphey, D. (1999). Evaluation also helps district and school staff and other key stakeholders agree on a clear focus for districtwide reform efforts. For these reasons, we believe evaluation should be viewed as part of the process of building local capacity for reform, rather than merely as an add-on. Chapter 1 provides a brief overview of the role of professional development in systemic standards-based reform, and chapter 2 provides general definitions and a description of the steps needed to plan and conduct a professional development evaluation. When a district undertakes standards-based reform, it is changing the whole education system. This is a lot of work. A standards based vision was enacted under the Clinton Administration in 1994. A reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) was passed to ensure that all states had rigorous standards for all subject areas and grade levels. This vision was then carried forward by the Bush Administration in 2001 with the passing of No Child Left Behind (NCLB).[3]. Standards-based school reform has become a predominant issue facing public schools. By the 1996 National Education Summit, 44 governors and 50 corporate CEOs set the priorities (Achieve, 1998) [4]. High academic standards and ex