

storyboard



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Dave Einsel
Houston ISD
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Terry B. Grier

Great Teaching, **Big Results**

In four years, the Houston school district has increased graduation rates and achievement by supporting and recognizing excellent instruction

When it comes to improving our nation's public schools, leaders are often tempted to look for quick fixes. A promising new curriculum or teacher training model or after-school program is always on the horizon. It's comforting to think that the solution to all the challenges we face in public education could be so simple.

But it's not that simple. Those challenges—low graduation rates, low college-readiness rates, academic performance that lags behind much of the developed world—weren't created overnight. We can't solve them overnight, either. Real school improvement requires a comprehensive plan focused on what matters most, and the willingness to stick with it over the long run. That's the only way we can give our children and future generations the schools they deserve—schools that can prepare them for success in college or a career.

I've learned this from personal experience. Since 2009, I've served as superintendent of the Houston Independent School District (HISD), one of the nation's largest school systems. When I started, our high school graduation rate was 68 percent—higher than many other urban districts, but still far too low.

Today, we still have a long way to go to give our students the schools they deserve, but we've made enormous progress. Our graduation rate has risen to 82 percent. The number of HISD students passing Advanced Placement exams has increased by almost 45 percent. And HISD won the prestigious 2013 Broad Prize for Urban Education in recognition of our improvement over the past several years.

HOW WE DID IT

We accomplished this by making great teaching our top priority through a comprehensive, multiyear plan called the Effective Teachers Initiative. We developed this plan under the leadership of our school board, and we launched it in 2009 in partnership with TNTP (formerly The New Teacher Project), a national nonprofit organization dedicated to giving students greater access to outstanding teachers.

We built our plan around great teaching, because

decades of research and experience tell us that nothing we can do for our students matters more. Great teachers have the power to put even the most disadvantaged students on an entirely different path in life. That means we need to do everything we possibly can to recruit, develop, and retain the best teachers we possibly can—so that all of our students benefit from great teaching every single day.

While it's a simple idea, making it happen has meant big changes:

- 1. Working with thousands of teachers, principals, and parents from across the district, we overhauled our teacher evaluation system.** Our old evaluation system didn't give teachers useful feedback on how they could improve their instruction, instead simply rating all teachers "good" or "great" no matter how well they were actually teaching their students. Our new system sets clear, high standards for effective teaching and gives every teacher the regular, useful feedback they need to do their best work in the classroom.
- 2. We changed our entire approach to professional development.** Instead of the one-size-fits-all workshops you'll find in most school districts, professional development in HISD revolves around individualized development plans that all of our teachers create in collaboration with their school leaders. Teachers participate in development activities that address their individual needs and interests. Many teachers also have the opportunity to work one-on-one with one of our Teacher Development Specialists—master teachers whose only job is to help other teachers improve their craft.
- 3. We made our process for hiring new teachers more efficient, and we're working to make sure principals fill their teacher vacancies earlier in the year.** This means we have a better chance at hiring the most promising teacher candidates before they receive job offers from other school districts.
- 4. We've begun creating opportunities for teachers to advance their careers while still remaining in the classroom.** As part of a pilot program last year,

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many of our most accomplished teachers earned higher compensation in exchange for taking on a leadership role in their school, such as coaching other teachers. These roles give teachers a chance to make an even bigger impact on their school while they continue to teach their own students every day.

- 5. We're finding creative new ways to give great teachers the recognition they deserve.** For example, our school buses soon will have billboards featuring some of HISD's best teachers, so that the entire community will know about the difference they're making in our students' lives.

GREAT TEACHING, BIG RESULTS

None of these changes has been easy, but we knew they were the right things to do for our teachers and our students. We knew that by dramatically improving the way we support and recognize great teaching, we would be able to give more of our students great teachers—and make HISD a destination for the best teachers across the country.

Today, more teachers are excited to work in HISD: Our applications for teaching positions increased 64 percent last year alone. That means we can be more

selective than ever before in the teachers we hire.

We're also holding on to more great teachers once they're here. Last year, we kept 88 percent of teachers who earned "highly effective" evaluation ratings, and we are on track to keep 95 percent this year. And teachers who participated in our pilot career pathways program said their leadership roles made them more likely to stay in HISD longer.

At the same time, far fewer ineffective teachers are remaining in HISD: Nearly 80 percent of teachers rated "ineffective" left the district after the last school year (compared to just 39 percent in 2009-10).

The result: Thousands more students every year are learning from effective teachers, and this is propelling the districtwide progress that earned us the Broad Prize and the 2013 Race to the Top district grant.

If one of the largest districts in the country can come this far in just four years, other districts can do it, too. We can start creating the schools our children deserve right now. The only question is whether enough education leaders have the courage to take the first steps—and the commitment to see the journey through.

Terry B. Grier (tgrier@houstonisd.org) is the superintendent of Houston Independent School District.