

The Vision and Guiding Principles For the 21st Century High School Learning Community

The Houston Independent School District (HISD) pledges to support its high schools in the redesign and development of new structures and processes that will optimize the performance of all students, assuring them a seamless transition into higher education and the 21st Century workforce.

The high school structure, as we currently know it, was originally designed to meet the needs of the industrial economy. Since that time, the economy has evolved into a technology-driven market, which requires students to have new and more advanced knowledge and skills to survive and compete in today's global economy. To meet the challenges of the 21st Century, our high schools must change in order to graduate students who are effective communicators, self-directed workers and thinkers, effective team members, proficient problem solvers, efficient technology users, responsible citizens and knowledgeable of world-wide issues.

Guiding Principles

The following principles, based on research and best practices in high school reform should guide our 21st Century High School Learning Community initiative.

I. High Expectations

High schools will set clear, fair, and high academic and conduct standards. An intellectual vision should be created, shared, and supported by all stakeholders in order to raise expectations for student achievement. There should be collective responsibility from adults and students for student outcomes. The district should provide students with a rigorous academic curriculum that challenges them to learn at high levels, and enables them to enter college or the workforce fully prepared to be successful, without the need for remediation.¹

II. Personalization

The most powerful use of the public school organizational structure is to set the size of the school-learning environment to lower student/adult ratios, at the point where every adult can be expected to know each student personally.² High Schools should reorganize themselves into smaller units, with the ideal size being 300 students. Where appropriate students should maintain instructional continuity to enhance mastery, and ideally, each student should have a personal adult advocate, who advises, supports and assists them with their academic and personal plans for success. A data management system is needed that provides structures and processes to allow teachers to easily identify and quickly intervene relative to students' individual needs, particularly the critical needs of 9th graders regarding literacy, class retention, and dropout issues. A mentoring system should be offered for students desiring peer support and relationships should be built with parents to engage them in their child's academic experience. College and career counseling programs should provide students with a variety of options to pursue after high school. School leaders should ensure that facilities are clean, attractive, safe and well equipped.

III. Coherency

Teachers must redefine their roles and relationships to create more effective learning environments.³ They should use a variety of instructional strategies to accommodate individual learning styles to provide students enriched and diverse opportunities to learn, to perform, and to be recognized. They should engage students and help them make connections between what they are learning and real-world experiences. Students should demonstrate an understanding of core subjects through a variety of meaningful assessments, such as project-based learning, portfolios, and exhibitions.⁴ High schools should establish relationships with middle schools, higher education, and businesses to enhance student development. These relationships should help to align secondary and higher education curricula and help to ease the transition between high schools and the workforce.

IV. Time and Resources

The central office must turn the traditional management pyramid upside down and become an enabler rather than an enforcer.⁵ High schools should be empowered to institute flexible allocation of available resources including people time, facilities and money. A school schedule should be created that is supportive of the teaching and learning environment. Seat time should no longer be equated with learning; students should have the opportunity to demonstrate what they have learned, and advance to the next level. Time should be provided for students requiring tutorials in core subjects. The school day should allow teachers to have common planning times to collaborate with colleagues.

V. Technology

Technology should be integrated into the teaching and learning process, including the curriculum, instructional process and assessment. High schools should be equipped with the proper infrastructure needed for effective internal and external communication. The district should provide a web portal that displays its curriculum and student grade and attendance reports so that anyone, with appropriate authority, can have easy access to this important student data at anytime. The appropriate staff should develop and implement a strategic plan for the use of technology in school. Continuous training should be provided for the staff so they can stay current on dynamic technological advances.

VI. Professional Development

All staff should be equipped, empowered, and expected to improve instruction. The district will provide on-going professional development for principals, teachers and support staff through on-line instruction and through in-services and workshops. Each teacher should develop a repertoire of instructional strategies to deploy as appropriate, to meet the individual and collective needs of students. Relationships with business and community organizations will provide principals, teachers and students opportunities to have hands-on experiences with real-world job requirements. Learning communities should be created to allow teachers and support staff to share information for the purpose of improving student achievement. Every year, educators should have a personal development plan that identifies goals and priorities to enhance their knowledge and skills for improving student achievement. High schools should build relationships with higher education to provide teachers and administrators with ideas and opportunities to enhance the education and performance of students.⁶

VII. Leadership

Schools must be responsive to their communities, providing parents and members of the community (and where appropriate, teachers, support staff and students) with formal, structured input into decision-making.⁷ High school principals should be evaluated on improvements in the measures listed below. They should also be the primary leaders in staff development by pursuing their own professional growth, including the knowledge required to lead and manage change. Principals should provide the school staff the appropriate tools needed to succeed on the job, as well as provide them opportunities to acquire the professional skills and knowledge needed for advancement. District administrators should exhibit leadership by supporting school principals in their efforts to plan, implement and sustain long-term school improvement.

Results of the 21st Century High School Implementation Process

All high schools will report in benchmarks for each of following areas and be evaluated in subsequent years on improvements in these measures:

- Lower 9th grade retention rates;
- Lower dropout rates;
- Higher student attendance rates;
- Higher literacy rates – with students reading at or above grade level;
- Higher number of students taking the SAT and other college entrance exams;
- Increase in SAT/ACT scores;
- Increase in the number of Texas Scholars;
- Increase in the number of G/T students;
- Increase in the number of students taking AP courses;
- Increase in the number of students passing AP exams;
- Improvement in TAKS scores and pass rates;
- Improvement in End of Course exam scores and pass rates;
- Higher number of students reporting satisfaction with high school on student surveys;
- Higher number of students taking dual credit courses;
- Higher number of students attending college;
- Lower number of students requiring remediation as college freshmen; and
- Higher number of graduates prepared to successfully enter the workforce.

End Notes

¹Turning Point: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century, The Report of the Task Force on Education of Young Adolescents, Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, Carnegie Corporation of New York, June 1989. Also quoted in the Houston Independent School District's Declaration of Beliefs and Visions' Mandate for Change.

²op.cit. Turning Point: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century. Houston Independent School District's Declaration of Beliefs and Visions' Mandate for Change.

³Houston Independent School District's Declaration of Beliefs and Visions' Mandate for Change

⁴Houston Independent School District's Declaration of Beliefs and Visions' Mandate for Change

⁵Houston Independent School District's Declaration of Beliefs and Visions' Mandate for Change

⁶Breaking Ranks: Changing an American Institution, A Report of the National Association of Secondary School Principals in Partnership with the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching on the high school of the 21st Century, NASSP, 1996.

⁷Houston Independent School District's Declaration of Beliefs and Visions' Mandate for Change.