

*Summary of the Prepared Testimony of  
Yvette East, Superintendent/Principal  
of Houston Heights Learning Academy*

**Before the Senate Education Committee**

**For**

**Monday, March 22, 2010**

**Regarding: Interim Charge 1 - Best Practices**

Houston Heights Learning Academy is a public elementary charter school located in the center of the Heights in Houston. The school opened its doors in 1998. This is my 4<sup>th</sup> year as Superintendent in which we have had 2 Recognized Ratings and now we hold an Exemplary Rating. Ninety percent of students are economically disadvantaged. We serve a population of 38 percent at risk. However, most of the students we do serve did not perform well in classrooms of traditional districts. We have a high success rate. We believe successful students equal a successful school. We offer a 1- 16 student/ teacher ratio with a strong emphasis in Literature and Science. Last year we received a Gold Star Performance rating in 3 out of the 4 TAKS subject areas.

At the Houston Heights Learning Academy, we focus on 5 major areas:

- I. A guaranteed and viable curriculum
- II. Challenging goals and effective feedback
- III. Parent and community involvement
- IV. A safe and orderly environment
- V. High quality professional development and planning opportunity

When evaluating a guaranteed and viable curriculum, we have to look at (2) things.

1. The opportunity for the children to learn and master objectives built into the curriculum.
2. The time needed in order for the children to be successful at the end of the year so that they will be able to be promoted to the next level.

Therefore, the intended curriculum must equal what the student is actually learning. It must be very clear on how can be achieved.

### **What we do differently?**

The main curriculum is the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. However, we use the Core Knowledge Scope and Sequence. When looking at skills the students need to develop in order to understand the concept, we adopted this Sequence and aligned it to the TEKS. It offers the teacher a month to month guide per grade and what a teacher needs to cover. This provides a steady pace in which teachers can accurately plan accordingly. CORE Knowledge offers a solid foundation and provides the essential and basic elements needed for all students in the main academic areas and defines the skills required to participate in each grade level so that the teacher is sure on what the child needs to know.

### **Challenging Goals & Effective Feedback**

We assess learning separately from teaching through progress monitoring.

Along with CORE Knowledge, we use several other supplemental curricula such as Lone Star Math. We restructure the Science format to follow with Cornelius Math & Science

which is listed in Texas Monthly as one of the best schools in Texas.

Reasoning Minds is a web based Math Curriculum out of Russia not adopted by the state offered by A+ which provides online tutorials, games, incentives for student learning. Curriculum is designed to meet the level of the learner and paced accordingly to establish accurate goals, strengths and deficiencies. Students love it!

Invest in teachers. As a school/district we have yearly book studies for the entire staff. We have read *Marzano's, What Works in Schools* and *Classroom Instruction that Works*, *Alan Blankentein's, Failure is Not An Option*, *Ruby Payne's Framework for Poverty*, *Fred Jones' Tools for Teachers* and *H. Lynne Erickson's Curriculum and Instruction for the Thinking Classroom*. This has created a strong professional learning community which allows the teachers a professional forum to understand and discuss why we do what we do.

Teachers are given a common planning time on Friday's in which team planning is done and professional development is offered. Teachers are sent to a variety of classes offered through the Neuhaus Center, Harris County Department of Education, Region IV Educational Service Center, University of Houston, University of Texas, Core Knowledge, and Texas Charter School Convention and the DANA Center.

Every year each teacher is given an instructional needs assessment. The results of the instructional needs assessment guide the development on individual professional development as well as school-wide professional development. We also use this assessment to build on individual strengths by implementing peer coaching mentoring for the instructional staff. Furthermore, a relationship with a Science Magnet Program allows our teachers to receive intense training in the area of Science. We use a continuous improvement tool supplied by the DANA center that focuses on the learning of the student and not specifically on the teacher so the teacher feels less intimidated.

### **Teacher Recognition**

The teachers participate in several incentive programs. One is the DATE grant which is offered by the state and focuses on growth. If the teacher grows 80% of a class by 8 months in the areas of Reading, Math, and Language the teachers receives incentive pay. Teachers that participate in the School Readiness Program sponsored by University of Texas meet all their requirements in professional development and student readiness receives an incentive at the end of the year. Additionally, teachers who participate in the Reasoning Minds Program receive incentive pay by meeting requirements in student growth and professional development.

### **Parental/Community Involvement**

PTO focuses on parent needs as well as student needs with the Parent Center. The school involves parents in planning, tutoring, and volunteering. Teachers and Administration are involved in community associations and provide house visits to those in need.