



Impactful, Collaborative Formative Assessment Partnership Brings Success to Houston ISD

In Texas' largest school district, formative assessment, analysis, and data-driven instruction support the whole child.

OVERVIEW

District

Houston Independent School District

Location

Houston, TX

Numbers

Number of students: 209,772

Number of staff members: 27,395

Number of schools: 280

Illuminate Education Customer Since

2016

CASE STUDY

In Houston Independent School District, Meaningful Goals Bring Monumental Success

With 209,772 students spanning across 280 schools, Houston Independent School District (HISD) is the seventh-largest urban school district in the United States. Almost 100 languages are spoken across the district, and 53 schools offer dual-language instruction—roughly 19 percent.

Given the diversity and size of HISD, district leadership pays close attention to systems and processes that track individual growth and ensure every student receives the right support. Betty Garcia-Hill, formative assessment manager at HISD, plays an important role in meeting this goal.

“My primary role is to inform our district on data literacy and what formative assessment actually is,” Garcia-Hill said. “From overseeing exams to supporting what happens after assessment is administered, I’m responsible for helping any person who interacts with assessments understand the story behind data, and identify areas of growth and strength.”

To reap all of the benefits of assessment, district leaders sought a solution that could be used to create meaningful student evaluations, dig deeper into data, and most recently, to ensure remote learning is working during the COVID-19 pandemic.

A Robust, User-Friendly Platform Becomes HISD's Assessment "Easy Button"

"A district our size, with our level of assessment offerings, needs a refined assessment tool that provides a simple, user-friendly process," Garcia-Hill explained. "Our primary goal was to find an 'easy button' for formative assessment."

After issuing a Request For Proposal in 2016, HISD leaders selected Illuminate Education's SchoolCity.

"We researched various platforms to see what was cutting-edge, and what appeared to be next-level. SchoolCity stood out because their team understands that urban districts need customization," Garcia-Hill said. "It was at that point that we began our beautiful partnership with SchoolCity, and they have not failed us."

Since partnering with SchoolCity, educators in HISD have truly engaged in formative assessment and data-driven instruction. Every campus takes ownership of the process. Within the first year of implementation, 85 percent of teachers were actively using SchoolCity. Today, over 50 percent of assessments in SchoolCity are created by teachers, who then use the data to inform instruction. This indicates classroom-level buy-in for the district-wide initiative.

As district goals shift, HISD has been able to adapt formative assessments to meet new expectations, ensuring they check every box. Faculty at HISD leverage SchoolCity to verify that accommodations and supports are in-line with state requirements. The district completes much of this work through close collaboration with the SchoolCity team.

"Every time we have a question or experience a bump in the road, SchoolCity rises to the challenge and helps us figure out a solution that really meets our needs," Garcia-Hill said. "We use the platform to customize reports for district evaluations, and have collaborated with SchoolCity's team to create specific data captures that track our unique goals, ensuring every district and state expectation is being met."

The State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) are a series of standardized tests that students in grades 3-12 are required to take. Educators use SchoolCity to prepare students for these rigorous exams through practice assessments that cover STAAR-tested subjects. Then, teachers use assessment data to adjust instruction and provide accommodations, such as text-to-speech and line reader features.

Pivoting in Response to a Global Pandemic

As COVID-19 continues to impact schools across the US, HISD has been able to use SchoolCity to facilitate assessments and evaluate student progress during remote learning. HISD has reached impressive numbers, and was even able to facilitate over 300,000 online assessments in one week.

“HISD had an amazing week of assessment with no systemic issues—this is a result of careful planning, strategic allotment of resources and the depth of talent from our district and the SchoolCity team,” Garcia-Hill shared. “We’re so grateful for this partnership, I feel that SchoolCity has grown with us, and has been able to adapt and handle every challenge we have thrown in your direction.”

OnTrack Assessment	11/9	11/10	11/11	11/12	11/13	Total
Online	31,180	59,693	71,514	63,989	39,246	39,246
Scanned	561	2,534	3,612	4,408	4,016	4,016
Teacher Scored	3,189	4,276	5,419	7,033	5,550	5,550
Performance Based	45	38	43	61	16	16
Total	34,975	66,541	80,588	75,749	48,828	306,726

Serving Every Student

Of the 280 schools in HISD, 53 are dual-language. To meet the varying needs of students, over 50 languages are built into the SchoolCity platform, with some languages even translated with a natural accent.

“We collaborated with SchoolCity to create refined scheduling for our dual-language schools in unique codes, creating an integration that ensures the right assessments are being given to the right students—seamlessly,” Garcia-Hill explained. “It’s a testament to the SchoolCity team’s commitment to customization and willingness to find ways to help our students succeed. Every child has specific needs and is best evaluated in their own individual way. SchoolCity has given our educators a tool to create assessments that are accessible and deliver the right user experience for our kids.”

Customizable, student-centric solutions are valuable for any school district, and especially for urban districts such as HISD.

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“Districts like ours understand the need for tools that can assist in navigating large data and support actionable improvement strategies,” Garcia-Hill explained. “SchoolCity has worked at our side to identify how we can continue moving in a positive direction, and their team is equally passionate in ensuring we’re not limiting the knowledge of our kids to multiple choice, but are instead able to see progress in their own, individual ways.”

A Data-Driven State of Mind

After rolling out SchoolCity, dozens of HISD campuses rose above “improvement required” status. Plus, educators leveraged the platform to implement strong Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) to discuss data-driven ways to improve student outcomes.

“Our entire district community has bought into true formative assessment and loves the platform they are doing it in,” Garcia-Hill said. “More than 50 percent of assessments are led by teachers on each of our campuses, that’s a strong outcome.”

In HISD, summative assessment holds each campus accountable to ensure they’re meeting the needs of every student. District leaders, in part, use assessment data to evaluate if instruction is effective.

“When I think back to being in the classroom, I wanted solutions that were simple, streamlined, and user-friendly,” Garcia-Hill explained. “When we put a tool with these key ingredients in front of teachers, they’re more likely to use it, make instructional decisions based on the data it provides, and drive powerful learning outcomes for students.”

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Graduation Rates Jump

Graduation rates at HISD increased 26 percent between 2007 and 2018, and 44 of the district's schools have been featured in U.S. News & World Report's "Best High School" rankings. These successes prove the value of HISD's mission to leverage data-driven instruction to equitably educate the whole child, so that every student graduates with the tools to reach their full potential.

From prioritizing literacy growth to finding new ways to prepare for and navigate state exams, HISD will continue to use formative assessment to support student success.

"Our district takes in learners from various countries, backgrounds, and origins. We serve the second-most diverse school district in the United States," Garcia-Hill said. "We use formative assessment to hold ourselves accountable as a district, and most importantly, ensure instruction is effective for every student."

When educators have access to a simple, streamlined, and user-friendly solution, they can use it to create impactful results.

"Our partnership with SchoolCity hasn't just given us a quality tool, it has allowed us to connect with an amazing group of talented people," Garcia-Hill concluded. "Their team has been there to support us every step of the way, and successfully overcome any challenges we've encountered—that's a true partner."

To learn more about SchoolCity, reach out to [schedule a demo](#).

