

Houston ISD implements Vocabulary.com for all middle and high school students, dominates national vocabulary competition.

SUCCESS STORY: Houston Independent School District



Houston ISD at a glance (2014-2015):

Enrollment	213,000
Title I	93%
Limited English Proficiency	30%
Bilingual	20%
ESL	8%
Race/Ethnicity	25% African American, 62% Latino, 8% White, 5% Other

CHALLENGE:

Moving the needle on literacy gains

To meet its goal of closing the achievement gap, HISD schools needed to increase students' reading comprehension skills. However, in spite of the clear link between vocabulary knowledge and academic success — and the high numbers of ESL students in the district — Houston had no formal vocabulary program in place in the school curriculum.

"We just had to find a way to make vocabulary work with our units and our lessons," reported Chavez High School English Department Chair Cristina Saldarelli.

SOLUTION:

Integrating Vocabulary.com into the curriculum

In the fall of 2014, HISD began implementing Vocabulary.com, with all 98 middle and high schools in the district participating.

Teachers across the schools' grade levels and subject areas were given the opportunity to build academic vocabulary learning into their curriculum.

Administrators noted that the adoption of Vocabulary.com dovetailed with the district's efforts to resolve Houston's literacy crisis. "This will definitely help us meet our literacy goals," Chavez High School Principal Rene Sánchez explained in an HISD news release.

RESULTS: *Creating a culture of word learning*

Teachers and administrators report that a culture of word learning has taken root across the district. A key to the enthusiastic reception of Vocabulary.com has been the ability of Vocabulary.com to provide differentiated instruction by adapting to each student's ability, as well as the effort-based rewards built into the gameplay. Students who would typically be considered "struggling" in their education have used Vocabulary.com as a springboard to challenge themselves academically and gain new confidence about their learning.

"Vocabulary.com is an easy way for the students to take charge of their own learning and to monitor their progress, individually and in relation to other class members. One of the things I like about Vocabulary.com is that it has inspired several 'reluctant students' to achieve. They are liking the challenge of getting to the top 10, but more important, they are challenging themselves to push on. Those are the real success stories."

–Janice Kemp, Lanier Middle School, 6L Language and Literature Teacher

The teacher dashboard of the Vocabulary.com Educator Edition, with its features for tracking student progress and monitoring trouble words, has been particularly useful for educators seeking differentiated instruction for their students. "Vocabulary.com has been especially helpful with struggling students," said Caroline Rothschild, 7th grade teacher at Lanier Middle School.

While students and teachers throughout HISD used Vocabulary.com to great success, a few schools leveraged their culture of word-learning success into national recognition in the Vocabulary Bowl. Following Vocabulary.com best practices, they incentivized student learning with prizes and shout-outs for high-performing students and classes.

"The Vocabulary Bowl has allowed students who have never felt academic success to be recognized and feel like they are making a difference," Chavez High School principal Rene Sánchez explained. "And that's giving them a sense of confidence and purpose in all of their classes."

A group of vanguard HISD schools vied for top spots on the daily and monthly national leaderboards in the Vocabulary Bowl, setting word learning goals, winning monthly Vocabulary.com banners, and calling attention to the importance of word learning districtwide.

Houston ISD had great success in the 2014–15 Vocabulary Bowl. Chavez High School won the national competition, mastering 322,000 words, with Bellaire High School coming in third, while Mickey Leland College Prep and Challenge Early College High School also placed in the top 20.

CONCLUSION: *HISD Expands Vocabulary.com to all students in grades 5–12*

Based on the success of the 2014-15 academic year, HISD expanded its implementation in the district in its second year. Vocabulary.com was extended to elementary schools as well, providing coverage to all students fifth grade and higher. In all, Vocabulary.com has been made available to nearly 100,000 students at nearly 300 schools districtwide.

The excitement around word learning is evident from the continued success of HISD schools in the 2015-16 Vocabulary Bowl. With Chavez's success in the Vocabulary Bowl cited as a source of inspiration, use of Vocabulary.com across HISD has increased. Lanier Middle School won the monthly leaderboard for December 2015 and is in contention for the nationwide middle-school competition for the academic year. s Houston ISD's experience attests, academic success across the curriculum and new-found enthusiasm for word mastery go hand in hand.



Close to 400 students gather in the Chavez High School cafeteria for a community-wide "Vocabulary Fest."