

Houston/Harris County Featured Community Overview Brief for Grad Nation Action Forum September 2009

Collaborative Overview

The Houston/Harris County community is home to 26 independent school districts. In a community of this size it is imperative to have a unified message across all sectors and schools that we believe in our children and we want them to succeed. Indeed their success drives the success of our entire community.

The Houston/Harris County (H/HC) Featured Community is a cross-sector group committed to raising high school graduation rates in Houston and Harris County through collaboration and coordination of efforts. The group is convened by the Joint City/County Commission on Children (JC4), which was established by an interlocal agreement between the City of Houston and Harris County. Part of the JC4's charge is to foster coordination, collaboration, and resource sharing between governments and private entities, and to develop and promote a set of guidelines to integrate government and private programs which will primarily focus on prevention and early intervention for children and their families. The H/HC Featured Community group is convened regularly and consists of over 20 member organizations representing the education, public, business, nonprofit and faith communities.

About Our Work

The overall goal for the Featured Community work is to tackle the dropout crisis in a family driven, community centered way.

The focus areas for our work include:

- Engaging parents to assist in understanding their role in their child's academic success
- Engaging special populations (i.e. foster youth, youth with mental health diagnoses, grandparent-led families population) and their families
- Promoting a positive message (we cannot succeed if youth do not succeed)
- Considering the determinants of why children drop out through a holistic approach (i.e. health, welfare, safety)
- Providing a process to address the problem (assess, intervene, and assure)
- Developing a mechanism by which parents can become aware of all the resources that exist to help them

An initial focus for the group is planning for the Cradle to College Summit in February 2010. The summit will focus on the role of the parent or caregiver in ensuring high school graduation. The *Cradle to College Summit* will be held at Wheatley High School. The Wheatley administration is extremely engaged in this process, as are the surrounding city and county facilities. We are anticipating approximately 350 – 400 participants, with three-quarters being parents and the others from various sectors (social service, health, business, and elected officials). We will include teams of parent leaders from other areas of HISD to observe and participate, with hopes that they can help facilitate the replication of this summit in their respective feeder patterns.

Key Initiatives and Programs

- **The Houston/Harris County Promise Zone** collaborative focuses its work in the South Region of the Houston Independent School District (HISD) with Harris County Precinct One Commissioner El Franco Lee and the Joint City/County Commission on Children guiding the initiative. Using Commissioner Lee’s long standing youth initiatives as a base for this effort, the collaborative is working with the school district and area youth-serving agencies to identify gaps in service and promote collaboration within the region to enhance the Five Promises for children, youth and families. The core activities range from child protective and mental health services to after school care and tutoring to teaching outdoor skills and conservation. Specific goals include: increase the number of students with mentors; increase parent involvement and engagement; decrease teen pregnancy; provide additional safe parks/green space; increase number of students with health/medical insurance; increase access to fresh produce; and increase service-learning opportunities. The Featured Community collaborative will also seek to support the Promise Zone efforts in the HISD southern region.
- **Expectation Graduation** was established to help raise the graduation rates among our youth through community partnerships that aim to ensure all students have the skills to go on to college, training, or good jobs. The annual *Reach Out to Dropouts* walk has attracted more than 11,000 volunteers who personally visit youth who do not return to school. The Walk has expanded and now includes 11 cities across Texas and 18 Houston-area school districts. Other cities continue to replicate this successful effort. The Mayor sends “Commit to Graduate” letters to Houston ninth-graders. Over 19,000 of them signed and returned their individual pledges to stay in school.
- The **Gallup Student Poll** will be administered in the Southern Region of HISD with discussion underway for implementation throughout HISD. The online survey of students in grades 5-12 assesses hope, engagement and well-being — true indicators of student success that link to grades, test scores, retention and employment.
- **Project Grad** is a non-profit education reform model. Over 90% of GRAD students are low-income and 91% are minority. The national Project GRAD model has grown from a scholarship program which began in partnership with Houston Independent School District in 1989. Today, Project GRAD Houston is at work in five feeder patterns of Houston ISD, serving 66 schools and over 45,000 children — 22.98% of the school district's total school population and approximately 24% of its total at-risk population.
- **Systems of Hope** meets the needs of Harris County children and youth with serious mental health needs and their families by creating a collaborative network of community-based services and supports using the systems of care framework. A plan of care is created for each family focusing on their strengths. Systems of Care is more than a program — it is a philosophy of how care should be delivered. It is an approach to services that recognizes the importance of family, school and community, and seeks to promote the full potential of every child and youth by addressing their physical, emotional, intellectual, cultural and social needs.
- **HISD Character Education Initiative** is a nationally acclaimed Character Education Program that was created in 1989 to incorporate social values into the district’s curriculum and school-wide activities. Students spend each month of the school year focusing on one of the nine values that

form the basis of the program: self-esteem, honesty, respect, trust, loyalty, justice, commitment, self-discipline, and self-reliance. Lessons are incorporated into daily instruction as a part of all core-curriculum courses.

Resources Needed to Bring Our Work to Scale

- Staff
 - Commitments to infrastructure that will support, sustain, expand and evaluate the multi-disciplinary components of this process.
 - It is our desire as we approach the summit to engage partners and encourage them to assign specific tasks for this project as staff functions.
 - Funding to support evaluation of strategies and outreach as well as additional outreach positions (1 Researcher; 2 Outreach positions, approximately 20 hours/week)
- Volunteers
 - As we approach the summit we would like to have parent teams involved in the drop out summit and to really drive the process.
 - We would like to increase the number of volunteers per school by 25% among parents and bring in outside volunteers (i.e. corporate or small business). We currently rely on our current partners to assist with recruiting volunteers as needed.
 - Explore and develop media partners (print, visual, and radio) who will champion work of Featured Communities partners.
- Informational Resources
 - Engage local PTAs and develop mechanisms to strengthen and expand them to non-participatory parents.
 - (A resource committee was formed to compile existing resources available to parents that exist in the feeder pattern targeted and in the district as well as online resources. This includes resources related to education as well as social services, transportation and basic needs.)

Questions & Challenges for Consideration

1. We would like to know the best way to engage the faith-based communities to support parent engagement.
2. How do you develop strategies which will engage community-based companies and small businesses to support parent engagement by their employees and customers?
3. How do we address other community-level organizations who are working on issues that may impact our goals?

Appendix A: Houston Alliance Member List

Convener: Sherea McKenzie, Joint City/County Commission on Children

Member Organizations

4-H Extension Services
40 Assets Workgroup
Big Brothers Big Sisters
Boys and Girls Club
Catholic Charities
Children's Defense Fund
Communities In Schools
Greater Houston Partnership
Harris County Dept. of Education
Harris County District Attorney's Office
Harris County Precinct One
Harris County Street Olympics
Hester House
Houston Area Urban League
Houston Independent School District, Student Engagement
Houston Independent School District, Character Education
Houston Independent School District, P-16 Council
Mayor's Anti-Gang Office
NFL Youth Education Town – Houston
One Star Foundation
Project Grad
So Loved 316, Inc.
State Farm
Systems of Hope
Texas Association of Partners in Education
United Way
YMCA Houston

Appendix B: Demographics & Statistics, Houston Independent School District

- Roughly 202,000 students are enrolled in HISDⁱ
- 79.5% of students are economically disadvantaged
- 29.7% of students are English Language Learners
- 9% of students are special needs students
- Graduation rate: 52.9% in 2004-05ⁱⁱ

ⁱ Houston Independent School District website, www.houstonisd.org/

ⁱⁱ Swanson, Christopher B., *Cities in Crisis 2009: Closing the Graduation Gap* (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center)