

Secrets to success: How one school system raised its Texas standardized scores

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Wylie ISD's progress on the standardized STAAR test proved to be remarkable especially concerning large districts according to an analysis by the Dallas News.

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When headlines in May bemoaned stagnant statewide scores on the STAAR tests, Jeannie Stone's reaction was "Not in Wylie!"

And the district's assistant superintendent of curriculum and instruction was right. In fact, Wylie ISD's progress on the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness exams was unique. Even so, the gains were modest and illustrate the challenges facing districts concerned about tests.

A *Dallas Morning News* analysis shows the lack of progress in statewide averages is also generally true at the district and even campus level.

But Wylie was as good as it gets for districts of at least 5,000 students, where almost 80 percent of the state's students are enrolled. Based on the *News'* analysis, Wylie gained significant ground on the state on eight of 17 exams given in grades 3 through 8 and lost ground on none.

Here's how unusual that record is: Of the large districts, only Los Fresnos CISD, north of Brownsville, also gained ground on eight tests. But it lost significant ground on three. Progress was so rare that only a third of the large districts gained significant ground on more tests than they lost ground on.

"I know what we're doing is not a fluke," Stone said.

But there's still plenty of room for improvement in Wylie. At least 85 percent of the district's students passed every test last year. But the current passing standards are well short of the levels the state says actually represent a path to post-secondary readiness. By that higher measure, about half the students would have failed every exam.

Wylie's success

Do Wylie's gains offer a pattern for other districts to follow?

“I do think it’s scalable,” said Richard Dufour, an education consultant and author who intends to write a case study about Wylie. “There are certain things we see whenever we find system-wide improvement. Among those things is leadership that maintains focus.”

But he and other experts list some natural advantages not available to other districts they say helped fuel Wylie’s turnaround on STAAR:

Partly, they point to low-hanging fruit — the ability to identify relatively straightforward gains. They mention newly hired, high-powered district leaders who went all-in on major changes. They refer to scale: A district of only 14,000 students and 19 campuses can be nimble.

But partly, they agree that Wylie’s success is tied to resources given to every teacher and a direct focus on every child. Many districts say they do that, of course. Not all are equally scrupulous.

Superintendent David Vinson talks about buy-in — from parents, the school board, his staff and down to teachers and students. When he took the job, his two kids started attending Wylie schools. That sends a message, he said.

“Live in the communities. Realize we are all in this together,” he said. “This is us moving our babies forward.”

Curriculum

In 2011, the last year of the TAKS tests, Wylie had been underperforming its demographic. Its schools were passing, but with average scores lower than other similar districts.

In June of that year, Vinson took over as superintendent, successor to the man who had held the job for 18 years. A month later, the district had its first-ever school declared “academically unacceptable” by the state.

Vinson commissioned an outside audit of the district curriculum, which had been produced in-house and used for eight years. The report was scathing: Any curriculum updates had been done by teachers who volunteered two days every summer. There was little evidence that it was being used consistently from campus to campus. The district tests weren’t useful.

“While teacher writers know what they teach, they do not in this system have enough training or time to dedicate to the intricacies of curriculum design and test-building in only two days,” the audit concluded.

A district Wylie’s size might need to spend \$1 million a year to create and maintain its own curriculum. Or it could buy one.

These days, for some conservatives, CSCOPE is a dirty word. But a few years ago, it was a popular curriculum designed by state-funded education resource centers and first released in 2006. (The letters in the name don’t stand for anything.) At one point, more than 80 percent of the districts in Texas were using all or part of the materials.

Restructuring

Wylie committed to producing the best CSCOPE rollout ever.

For some districts, teachers were given new CSCOPE materials just before the school year. No time was given for teacher training. Teachers complained that CSCOPE left no room for creativity.

But Wylie started the changeover in spring 2012 to prepare for the next school year. Teachers had months to think about the best ways to adapt the new materials to their classrooms.

Stone and Vinson also restructured the central office, pushing more support to the schools. Teachers were expected to participate in grade-level “professional learning communities” where specific teaching strategies were planned and later evaluated. Differentiated lessons became a priority at Wylie.

Much of this had been standard in some other districts for several years. But it was all brand-new for Wylie.

Vinson and Stone visit every school almost every week — and they say they’re explicitly open to critiques from teachers. Staffers who didn’t get on board found someplace else to work, Vinson said.

“People know if they don’t fit into your system,” he said.

And by the way, do not count Wylie as one of those districts that dismisses STAAR as a bad test. It’s much better than the TAAS and TAKS that preceded it, Vinson said.

In 2013, some conservatives started attacking CSCOPE as anti-American. Wylie officials shrugged and kept using the material (now called the TEKS Resource System). On the district Facebook page, Vinson invited comments. When people posted complaints, he made a point to personally call every person.

“That freaked them out a little,” he said with a chuckle.

‘They are the change’

Today, the scene in many Wylie classrooms is far different than it was a few years ago. Far fewer rooms have kids lined up in rows with a teacher lecturing from behind a desk. Recently, the kids in Sherri Chuang’s third-grade class at Birmingham Elementary sprawled out in a cluster on the floor hashing out the details of the Declaration of Independence.

“Who was the main writer?” Chuang asked.

“Thomas Jefferson!” was the chorused return.

This is her sixth year teaching in Wylie. She’s a fan of the district’s use of CSCOPE.

“A lot of us carry the plans around in our hands. We don’t want to miss anything,” she said.

Staffers at the local education resource center who did that curriculum audit in 2011 have continued working with the district. Sandy Maddox is the Region 10 deputy executive director over instruction.

She tags several reasons for the Wylie success. One of her keys was a motivated community where education is a priority that crosses demographic boundaries.

“Wylie attracts an upwardly mobile population that wants to have their children be very successful,” she said.

And that low-performing school that got the ball rolling for the changes? Grady Burnett Junior High was the campus dinged as academically unacceptable for the 2011 TAKS scores. After the 2014 STAAR tests, it's "met standard" with distinctions for math, social studies, student progress, closing performance gaps and postsecondary readiness.

According to the *News* analysis, over the three years of STAAR, it's gained ground on four of seven tests, and lost ground on one.

Vinson says his district's progress only happened because he was able to bring so many stakeholders on board.

"First, listen intently and get them to understand they are the change. I am not the change. It's us doing it, not me doing it," he said. "If you don't have their hearts, you're done for."

Staff writer Holly K. Hacker contributed to this report.

Wylie ISD by the numbers

Enrollment: 14,045

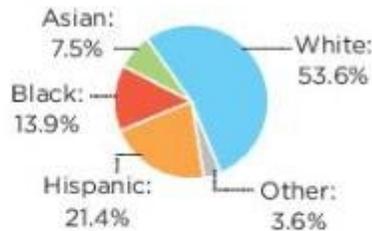
Number of schools: 19

Number of teachers: 894

Operating budget: \$99 million

Economically disadvantaged student percentage: 27.6%

Student demographics



Wylie's average STAAR test scores that gained ground (✓), or stayed even (-) with state averages. NA means no tests.

	Reading	Math	Science	Writing	Social studies
3rd grade	✓	✓	NA	NA	NA
4th grade	✓	✓	NA	-	NA
5th grade	-	-	-	NA	NA
6th grade	-	✓	NA	NA	NA
7th grade	-	✓	NA	-	NA
8th grade	-	-	✓	NA	✓

Note: All data 2013-14 school year

SOURCE: Wylie ISD; *Dallas Morning News* research

Troy Oxford/Staff Artist