2015–16 Reward Schools Case Study Report

Hudson Middle School

Hudson Independent School District, Region 7

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Acknowledgments

This publication is part of a series of reports produced in 2016–17 about seven Reward School campuses that participated in a case study project. This publication was developed with collaboration from the Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) at American Institutes for Research, the Texas Education Agency (TEA), and the Texas Center for District and School Support (TCDSS) at the Region 13 Education Service Center (ESC). The following staff collaborated on this project: Mark Baxter (TEA), Deborah Brennan (TCDSS), Grace Fleming (TXCC), Lisa Gonzales (TEA), Angelica Herrera (TXCC), Cody Huie (TCDSS), Allison Ivey (TCDSS), Barry Link (TCDSS), CoCo Massengale (TXCC), Anne Post (Region 16 ESC), and Trent Sharp (TXCC). For additional information about the case study project, please contact Lisa Gonzales at Lisa.Gonzales@tea.texas.gov.

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Report Contributing Authors: Grace Fleming (TXCC), Deborah Brennan (TCDSS), and Lisa Gonzales (TEA)

Overview of the Reward Schools Case Studies Project

The state of Texas is home to more than 5 million primary and secondary public school students. From districts in major urban centers such as Houston and Dallas to those in rural areas far from cities, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) serves schools and students of all backgrounds. Similar to schools across the country, many Texas schools face difficult circumstances, including poverty and high rates of student mobility. Schools that receive Title I funding are especially likely to face these and other challenges. The objective of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) is for the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to help address the greater educational challenges facing high-poverty communities by targeting additional resources to school districts and schools with high concentrations of poverty (ESEA of 1965). Decades of research have shown that poverty has a strong and negative impact on student academic performance (Arnold & Doctoroff, 2003; Herbers et al., 2012).

Despite significant obstacles, 6 percent of Title I public schools in Texas have gone beyond meeting state standards to earning the distinction of Reward School status. Reward Schools share many similarities with low-performing schools in terms of student socioeconomic status and other demographic characteristics. However, Reward Schools have implemented practices that allow the schools to overcome these challenges and become high-performing learning institutions. TEA and the Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) developed an initiative in 2014–15 to implement a best practices case study project, with the goal of recognizing the extraordinary accomplishments of Reward Schools and providing an opportunity for them to share their success stories with the state and other local educational agencies.

When the project began in 2014–15, eleven schools participated as case study sites (TEA, 2015). In 2015–16, seven new schools were selected to participate in the project. The purpose of this report is to present the findings from one of the seven newly participating schools. In addition to staff from TEA and TXCC, staff from the Texas Center for District and School Support (TCDSS) at the Region 13 Education Service Center (ESC) joined the project and assisted with the fieldwork at the case study schools. TCDSS representatives interviewed and videotaped school staff and students from three of the participating Reward School case study sites to produce short videos.[1]

This report presents the findings from Hudson Middle School in Region 7. The report details the systems and structures Hudson Middle School uses to improve academic performance, apply quality data to drive instruction and increase learning time as well as the ways in which Hudson Independent School District (ISD) supports the school in its efforts. For more details about the 2015–16 Reward Schools Case Studies Project, including aggregate findings of the analysis from the seven participating schools, with all seven Texas Accountability Intervention System critical success factors (CSFs) represented, please refer to the *2015–16 Reward Schools Statewide Report.*[2] The Statewide Report also includes the findings from analysis of the aggregated student interview and school climate walkthrough data.[3]

[1] Clips from the videos are available at http://www.taisresources.net. They are under the under the heading "Critical Success Factors" and are titled "Teacher Quality," "Academic Performance," "School Climate," and "Use of Quality Data to Drive Instruction."

[2] The 2015–16 Reward Schools Statewide Report is available at [insert URL here]

[3] Because of the small sample size of student participants and data gathered using the school walkthrough tool, the results of the analyses of the student interviews and school walkthrough appear in aggregate form in the *2015–16 Reward Schools Statewide Report.* School-level results are not included.

Overview of Hudson Middle School

Hudson Middle School, located in rural Angelina County, is part of Hudson ISD and supported by the Region 7 ESC. The area is surrounded by lush east Texas forests. School leaders, district leaders, and teachers maintain effective working relationships with nearby Angelina College as well as other rural and small city school districts in the area.

Hudson Middle School has met state expectations for many years on the Texas tests currently known as State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), and students have continued to achieve at high levels with the current leadership in the district. The school's accolades for 2014–15 include distinction designations for academic achievement in reading/English language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies as well as top 25 percent: student progress, top 25 percent: closing performance gaps, and postsecondary readiness. It is important to note that school and district leaders as well as teachers are not concerned with the state test scores and associated honors; rather, they are concerned with the success of their students in graduating from high school and completing college or career training for successful lives. Their focus is on how well their students master the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS).

The research team conducted interviews, focus groups, surveys, and a school walkthrough during two days in February 2016. These activities included a focus group with the district superintendent, director of curriculum and instruction, assistant superintendent, and middle school principal and aimed to gain a district perspective of the middle school as well as of the wider school improvement context across the district. The principal was interviewed again separately for a more detailed picture of the school itself. The research team conducted two focus groups with teachers representing all grade levels and multiple subjects. The team interviewed nine students representing all grade levels and conducted a school walkthrough.

This report presents results from qualitative analyses of the focus group with district leadership, the interview with the principal, and the two teacher focus groups. The analyses captured information about the CSFs highlighted in this case study (Academic Performance, Use of Quality Data to Drive Instruction, and Increased Learning Time). To maintain the participants' privacy and confidentiality, participants are not named.

Snapshot of Hudson Middle School

2014–15 demographics:

- 649 students
- Grade span: 6–8
- 50% economically disadvantaged (i.e., students eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch)
- 3% English language learners
- 11% student mobility rate
- 7% African American
- 21% Hispanic
- 70% White

In 2014–15, the state accountability ratings for the school were:

- Met standard
- Academic achievement in reading/English language arts
- Academic achievement in mathematics
- Academic achievement in science
- Academic achievement in social studies
- Postsecondary readiness
- Top 25 percent: student progress
- Top 25 percent: closing performance gaps

Critical Success Factor 1: Academic Performance

Academic Performance is the foundational CSF. By supporting the CSFs of Teacher Quality, Leadership Effectiveness, Use of Quality Data to Drive Instruction, Family and Community Engagement, Increased Learning Time, and School Climate, campuses can increase performance for all students. TEA considers Academic Performance to be a CSF aligned with the ESEA turnaround principle requiring schools to strengthen their instructional program based on student needs and ensuring that the instructional program is research based, rigorous, and aligned with state academic content standards (ED, 2012; TEA & TCDSS, n.d.). School turnaround literature asserts that successful implementation of schoolwide instructional practices should lead to improvements in student academic performance (Lutterloh, Cornier, & Hassel, 2016). Data from the site visits show the participating Reward Schools have espoused the importance of Academic Performance on their respective campuses. Hudson Middle School showed evidence of all of these factors throughout the interviews, focus groups and observations. Participants demonstrated a broad-ranging concept of education, beginning with the notion that classrooms expand beyond walls into the national forest, which wraps around the campus to the infinity of the Internet. Although this district is property poor, it makes up by identifying small funding streams and every possible resource that can help students at little or no cost. On the day the research team visited the school in late February 2016, one class flew drones that students built and maintained on school grounds, another class connected with the Alamo in San Antonio by Internet, and a third class held an interactive lesson with peers at a school in another Texas community. These activities are a small sampling of the innovative teaching and learning taking place throughout the school that day. The commitment to high achievement extends throughout the district, which consists of a primary school, an elementary school, the middle school, and a high school. The Academic Performance themes that demonstrate this CSF are:

- Schoolwide instructional strategies,
- Curriculum alignment, and
- High expectations.

Schoolwide Instructional Strategies

The principal and teachers maintain a sharp focus on how TEKS is being addressed as lessons are planned, delivered, and assessed. Teachers create lessons using a wide range of materials and media, and the principal monitors how these lessons match up with state standards. Central to teachers' decision making is the appropriate and creative use of technology in all classes. At the same time, all

Best Practice: Sustained Silent Reading

"[SSR] increases their stamina, their ability to read for extended periods of time, but it also gives us the opportunity to monitor their comprehension during those times as well. Not just the language arts teachers but because our tutorial students are spread out among all the teachers. We have given our math teachers and our social studies teachers and science teachers some information like a packet of strategies that they can use to check for comprehension quickly."

–Teacher

classes must emphasize the most basic learning element: reading. When staff realized that a significant number of students were doing poorly in school because they were not able to read at their grade level, the principal committed the entire school to addressing that issue. This was not an easy matter because middle schools are not normally where students learn how to read; that work should happen in elementary schools, where lessons are designed to teach reading. However, the ability to read has an impact on all other learning in all subjects.

The principal and teachers worked together to determine how to address the issue. They decided to make all students use the first 15 minutes of the daily 45-minute tutorial period for sustained silent reading. Every day, students spent at least 15 minutes reading. The results were quick and dramatic. The Lexile scores, used to measure reading ability, jumped upward, with students gaining 200 to 300 points. The principal reported that now all students know their Lexile score and have a target for where they want their score to be by the next assessment.

In addition to maintaining a reading focus, teachers are aware of how their classes reflect the TEKS for their grade level. They build their lessons accordingly, and every nine weeks assess the TEKS. To make this approach work, the principal works closely with teachers to ensure that they develop assessment instruments that measure the TEKS at the appropriate levels. Although the questions in their assessments are designed to measure mastery of TEKS, there is also a strictly enforced rule that nothing in the assessment can be directly taught to the students. The principal and teachers willingly engage in discussion of their "no direct teach" policy as student assessment scores are posted. This professional discourse between the principal and teachers, as well as among the teachers, is a highly valued practice in the school. The teachers indicated that this discourse is a critical practice throughout the school.

One more important point regarding instruction concerns the interaction among the principal, teachers, and students. Although the principal gives the teachers a great deal of flexibility to design coursework that addresses the TEKS, he does have one inflexible rule: "Don't be boring." This hard-and-fast rule requires teachers to accept the society in which their students live and realize that the students will eventually become productive citizens. The teachers know their students live in a technology-driven, hyperactive world where young people expect things to move quickly. Teachers are expected to develop coursework that reflects reality as part of ensuring their students are ready for that world.

Best Practice: The World Is Their Classroom

"This is our Google hangout site, so this takes us to our map. You can see everywhere that we've been so far across the globe. We continually stop with South Africa, [where] we help sponsor a school, as well as through the various drives that will be for kids. We've been to Rome. We hung out with Charles Dickens's great-great-granddaughter when they had Dickens on the Strand in Galveston."

–Principal

Curriculum Alignment

The superintendent described the district's approach to curriculum alignment as focused on the TEKS for each subject at each grade level. Hudson Middle School successfully established this process during the districtwide improvement changes several years ago. There is more information about the process later in this report, but, with regard to curriculum alignment, it is important to understand that all educators in the district—from the superintendent to administrators to teachers—expect teaching and learning to align with the TEKS. The interviewees described consistent efforts to ensure that alignment.

Best Practice: Align Curriculum to TEKS

"You look at your assessments and you use the information to build the 21st Century Learning Model. Then you take your poor-performing TEKS; you look at what's not working with those particular TEKS. You design a 21st Century Learning Model for those TEKS."

–Principal

High Expectations

The district and school personnel interviewed expressed high expectations for their students because they connect success at any point in the formal education process to potential success in all areas of adult life. They also treat the students as they would their own children, which in turn builds trust with the students and sets up an environment where the students accept the challenge of high expectations and work hard to meet the expectations. For the principal, this is a personal matter as well as a professional one. He shared that he is dyslexic and has attention deficit disorder and knows firsthand about the challenges of education. He said, *"The most inadequate feeling that you can have in life is when you're the one in the room that does not know what is going on."* With that understanding, the teachers and principal constantly strive to make every possible resource available to their students for their learning.

Expectations at Hudson Middle School are not limited to academics. As part of the district's commitment to collaboration with the community, staff have worked with local employers to identify what is needed in the workforce as well as any gaps that are evident among graduates from their schools. An important gap named by employers was the lack of soft skills. Hudson ISD graduates lacked basic interaction skills needed to obtain and maintain work. These include leadership development, working in groups, being polite to adults, and knowing how to conduct themselves when passing in the hallways and eating lunch. The district then committed to teaching soft skills, beginning in prekindergarten and continuing through the system. The superintendent offered a recent example: *"For instance, two students from the journalism class in middle school came over yesterday to take my picture. They walked in, [greeted me by name], stuck their hand out, 'My name is such and such. I'm with the journalism class. I'm here to take your picture.' I said, 'Wonderful,' and those are the soft skills."*

According to state standards and expectations, Hudson Middle School has been quite successful. It scores high on the state test each year and receives numerous accolades as a result. At the school and in the district, the concern remains focused specifically on their own assessments of accomplishing TEKS and raising Lexile scores.

Best Practice: Reading and Data Use

"You see a lot of those kids that aren't showing growth are the ones that we're trying to target. The progress monitoring and the ones that we are trying to keep from falling through the cracks. We've got to figure out why there is no growth being shown here.

Schoolwide, I know every teacher in every grade level social studies, math, science gets that report so they can see a struggling student. Is reading affecting my class?"

–Principal

Critical Success Factor 2: Use of Quality Data to Drive Instruction

Using quality data to drive instructional decisions can lead to improved student performance (Wayman, 2005; Wayman, Cho, & Johnston, 2007; Wohlstetter, Datnow, & Park, 2008). This CSF emphasizes the effective use of multiple sources of disaggregated data. However, it is not necessarily the amount of data used but rather how the information is used that matters (Hamilton, et al., 2009). For example, academic achievement can improve when teachers create regular opportunities to share data with individual students (Black & Wiliam, 2006). However, it is not the only significant use of data to drive instructional decision making; it is also the ongoing communication of data with others that provides the greatest opportunity for data to have a positive impact on student learning outcomes. Hudson administrators and teachers have found practical solutions to obtaining quality data at low cost or even no cost, resulting in the school being strong in the following elements:

- Schoolwide data use,
- Multiple data sources and variety, and
- Classroom data use.

Schoolwide Data Use

Hudson ISD and Hudson Middle School, in particular, excel at applying free online resources to the needs in their schools and classrooms. They rely heavily on the many resources available through Google to develop hangouts for all teachers, departments, grade-level teachers, and students and teachers. They also use Google Docs and Google Classroom to develop, document, and track lessons and information. These resources help them collect data they can use to identify strengths and weaknesses in classroom accomplishments and student achievement. The school administrators and teachers use DMAC Solutions,[4] a data management software program, to pull and analyze data. Another popular data source across the school is Lexile scores, which specify at what grade level each student should read. This data sharing goes all the way to the student level, with each student knowing what his or her Lexile level is and what it should be.

[4] DMAC Solutions is a suite of Web-based tools developed at the Region 7 ESC. According to the website, "The applications provided by DMAC exist to supply Texas educators with the tools and services necessary to develop and improve the quality of education provided to students" (https://www.dmac-solutions.net/).

The school also generates significant data by following strict regulations for developing assessments of the TEKS expected at each grade level in each subject. These assessments offer the most accurate and up-to-date picture of what students have learned each nine weeks, thus allowing teachers to pinpoint what needs refreshing in the next nine weeks. This system permits teachers to make adjustments in the short term while those students are still in their classrooms instead of having to wait for an annual test to tell them what their students from the previous school year did and did not master. This system is also the reason teachers at Hudson do not need to talk specifically about test preparation for the state exam. They know their students will be ready for that exam because they spend the whole school year teaching the TEKS that are expected and developing the test-taking skills and stamina that students need in any testing situation for their grade level.

Multiple Data Sources and Variety

This report has already mentioned a variety of data sources—such as Lexile scores, assessments, and assignment results, along with student attendance and similar information captured in Google Docs and Google Classroom. Google Drive and clickers are additional tools Hudson employs in classrooms. Google Drive holds a wide variety of data from various sources all in one location so that teachers have access to everything at once. Teachers are timely and thorough in adding to or modifying their Google Drive as needed, thus allowing easy manipulation of all available data in one place. Respondents stated that part of the beauty of this system is that multiple users can be in the files at one time so that one teacher's efforts are not negated by someone else's work at the same time. Another resource that teachers use is clickers, which allow every student to respond at the same time to whole-group questions and provide immediate feedback about the learning taking place in the room. This next section of this report describes this technique further.

Best Practice: Valuing Multiple Data Sources

"We don't use one score. It's Lexile levels, it's grades, it's attendance, it's classroom observation by the teacher. Nine-week exams."

–Principal

Classroom Data Use

In keeping with the principal's rule that classrooms cannot be boring, teachers have fully embraced clickers as an efficient means of gauging student learning in the moment while also providing an entertainment factor. Students enjoy using the clickers to answer whole-group questions, and the teacher has instant access to the data showing who "gets it" and who is still trying to figure out the lesson. This immediate feedback allows teachers to adapt their teaching strategy and technique to what is happening at that moment. Use of the clickers generates enthusiasm among the students while providing meaningful learning at the same time.

Critical Success Factor 4: Increased Learning Time

Research promotes a three-pronged approached to the Increased Learning Time CSF that includes the following elements: (1) increased academic learning time; (2) increased enrichment activities; (3) and increased teacher collaboration and professional development. Increased Learning Time necessitates strategies that maximize the number of sustained, engaging instructional minutes, the result of which is "higher academic achievement, especially for disadvantaged students" (Gettinger & Seibert, 2002; Jez & Wassmer, 2011). To be successful, implementing Increased Learning Time must be strategic. Effective strategies include providing a rigorous, well-rounded education that prepares students for college; improving teacher training; improving and aligning the curriculum; reducing distractions; creating year-round schedules; providing block scheduling; using the time for teachers to thoroughly analyze and respond to data; and setting aside time to coach and develop teachers to continuously strengthen their instructional practices (Chalk Board Project, 2008; Kaplan & Chan, 2012).

The Hudson principal and teachers, along with district staff, worked hard to find effective ways to extend the school day and modify their schedule with minimal financial resources. A couple of strategies in particular have taken them a long way toward improving student achievement:

- Developing a modified schedule and
- Providing learning opportunities beyond the school day.

Modified Schedule

The Hudson schedule reserves the last 45 minutes of each day for tutorials, in which all students work on assignments and lessons that need attention. Teachers recognized that this time could be used to help students with identified needs using targeted guidance, so they dedicated one day a week to highlight each of the targeted subjects. Mathematics, English language arts, science, and social studies each have one designated day each week so that students with challenges in a particular subject can return to that teacher's classroom for targeted teaching on the designated day. Teachers appreciate being able to give students additional help when they see they are falling behind rather than waiting for the student to fail and then intervening.

The tutorial sessions take place at the same time as the 15 minutes of sustained silent reading. All students who are not in designated subject tutorials take the first 15 minutes of tutorial time to simply read silently. Accountability is built into this practice because teachers and students know that the principal can show up in any classroom

Best Practice: Tutorial Time Each Day

"We have a schedule within a schedule. We have certain days that are dedicated to math, ELAR [English language arts and reading], science, social studies. If we have a student who's struggling in math, we can put them with their math teacher for an extra 45 minutes a day, or they can be with an ELAR teacher. If they're falling behind for me, I can call one of the other teachers and say, 'Hey, can I have so and so for tutorials this week?' or whatever. That's helpful having that flexibility to do that."

–Teacher

on any day during tutorials and take the book any student is reading to quiz him or her about the reading material. This is not a "gotcha" strategy to intimidate the students; rather it is a respectful exchange between student and principal to emphasize the importance of being able to read well. Part of the lesson is for students to understand that reading is critical to being successful in life.

Learning Opportunities Beyond the School Day

When the principal and teachers found that several students were struggling with mathematics facts that should have been memorized, they realized they would have to find a way to close that gap for those students. Students struggled with basic mathematics functions such as multiplication, division, subtraction, and percentages. They decided to offer an after-school program and call it Foundation Acceleration. The program became a practical resolution to the mathematics gap issue even though it was completely voluntary. School staff made a series of important decisions to make the program work. First, they offered the program to students who were struggling to learn before assessments to minimize failures on the assessments. After those students caught up with their classmates, they remained in the program to receive accelerated learning on concepts and functions before they were taught in the regular classroom. The teachers hired to teach Foundation Acceleration were allowed a great deal of flexibility, with the continued reminder that they could never be boring. They had to work to keep the students' attention after a full day of school. The program included daily snacks for the students, and those snacks were foods that middle school students wanted, such as chips and soda. Teachers opted to bring the students outdoors for a few minutes to eat their snacks at the beginning of Foundation Acceleration. The outside break turned out to be a great way to get students to then settle back into learning mode for the remainder of their time. The program has become not only successful but also popular with the students to the extent that they do not want their inclusion in the program to end even once they are caught up in their coursework.

Best Practice: Foundation Acceleration

"There's something very powerful for children when they know an answer because they've been to Foundation and they've heard it early and they can say it ahead of the others in the class that they know are stronger math students. That's what I get the biggest charge out of is watching my weakest students outmaneuver the other ones. They're all looking around: 'How did you know that?'"

–Teacher

District Support

Although the principal and teachers at Hudson Middle School demonstrate strong professional capabilities and commitment to their students and each other, an additional layer of support exists that has served as a catalyst for greater and more significant changes at the school. The superintendent decided several years ago to take the district through a systemic improvement process, even though it was already successful by state standards. She took five to six years to collaboratively determine and implement the new direction for education at Hudson, and in doing so she earned the trust of school and district leaders to fully engage in the process. Their first step was to come to a common understanding of what "quality education" is.

Best Practice: Do the Right Thing

"The thing I'm most proud of is that we were able to walk away from a system that was so devastating to students, to teachers, to education, and the trust factor was there for us to take that risk to begin moving in a totally new, different direction."

–District Staff Member

Six years later, Hudson had a whole new way of conducting education, and it was built on shared values and a direction for all the schools in the district.

With the change process completed and the new Hudson ISD established, the new culture urges educators to constantly look for better ways to teach students and prepare them for adult life in the 21st century. At Hudson Middle School, district support includes finding a way to provide what students need through Foundation Acceleration and trusting the principal and teachers to have fully researched any recommendations they make for further changes toward improvement. When the principal turns to district leaders for help with sustaining Foundation Acceleration, together they manage to find what is needed to keep the program running. The principal also credits district staff with "phenomenal" grant writing to continuously find additional funds to meet student needs.

The teachers know the district supports them. One teacher described the principal's interaction with district leaders this way: *"He'll go to [the superintendent] and the board and say, 'Look, we need this. This is what my kids and my teachers need.' We have a very supportive superintendent and very supportive board, and if they can find money somewhere, then they'll help us."*

Summary

The Hudson Middle School principal and teachers are committed to an ongoing search for best resources and practices to prepare their students for success in the real world. Although the district and school are property poor, they have found many affordable and free resources available to provide a high-quality education. These resources remove walls and take students into virtual classrooms around the world and outdoor classrooms in their natural setting. The innovative approaches of Hudson teachers and leaders include their use of quality data to drive instruction and maximize learning time to constantly improve academic performance. By maintaining high expectations for their students and presenting challenging and well-designed course materials, the educators at Hudson urge students to achieve their greatest potential. The students, in turn, respond by consistently meeting those challenges.

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