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## Houston, We have a...Solution?

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## Houston, We Have a... Solution?

*The Arkansas Department of Education recently released the list of the lowest performing schools in Arkansas—labeled as focus and priority schools. Now that these schools have been singled out, they will be subjected to heavy intervention. Educators and policy-makers all over Arkansas have their eyes on these schools and are asking - what's next? How do we turn around lower performing schools? What works? In this policy brief, we outline one particular program—the Apollo 20 program—that is working to turn-around achievement in lower performing schools. Early results show gains comparable with prominent charter schools in the nation, but some criticize the program's focus on only a few particular schools rather than having a broader reach.*

### Apollo 20

The Houston Independent School District (HISD) began the Apollo 20 program as “a groundbreaking program designed to improve the academic achievement of students in 20 HISD ‘priority’ schools, and to create models for excellent teaching and learning for replication throughout the district.”<sup>1</sup>

Houston, like many large cities, is home to many chronically underperforming public schools. In response to this problem, Apollo 20 began in the 2010-11 school year in four high schools and five middle schools in HISD chosen because of low performance; eleven elementary schools were added during the 2011-12 school year. In its first year in middle and high schools, the program served 7,000 students.

The Apollo 20 program was developed by Dr. Roland Fryer of Harvard University’s EdLabs. It is funded with \$29 million from federal, state, and local money, and \$2 million from private sector and charitable dona-

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### Summary Points

- In 2010-11 school year, the Houston Independent School District (HISD) implemented the Apollo 20 program in nine of its lowest achieving schools: four high schools and five middle schools. In 2011-12, eleven elementary schools were also included.
- The program, developed by Dr. Roland Fryer of Harvard University’s EdLabs, includes five strategies: effective leadership and teachers, more instructional time, use of data to drive instruction, intense tutoring, and a culture of high expectations.
- Early results show increases in math scores and attendance rates, as well as a decrease in suspensions, leading Dr. Fryer to conclude the results are “strikingly similar” to those of prominent charters.
- Some, however, argue the program is not cost-effective or replicable on a larger scale.

tions. Donors include the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, the Houston Endowment, and other companies and private donors. In total, the program allocates:

- \$9.5 million per year for each high school
- \$7.7 million per year for each middle school
- \$11.3 million per year for each elementary school

### The Program

Apollo 20 is built upon five specific “research-based strategies” identified by Dr. Fryer. In order to build the program, Dr. Fryer examined the results of successful charter schools in New York City and identified the best practices that increase student achievement. Those strategies are:

- Effective leadership and instruction
- More instructional time
- Improved data collection
- High-dosage tutoring
- Culture of high expectations

### Effective Principal and Teachers in Every School

The first of these strategies included higher quality principals and teachers in every Apollo 20 school. To accomplish this, the HISD developed the Effective Teacher Pipeline, which looks for teachers already in HISD willing to commit at least two years to a “turnaround” school. Qualifying teachers who are selected would receive a \$10,000

<sup>1</sup>HISD Apollo 20 website: [hisd.org](http://hisd.org)



stipend annually to make the switch. Additionally, the plan called for the replacement of all nine principals in the first year and a commitment of 50 additional Teach for America teachers in these schools.

In its first year, the program had 196 new teachers in Apollo 20 schools, composing 39% of the Apollo 20 teaching force. It also selected Apollo 20 teachers to participate in professional development sessions designed by HISD and in Saturday professional development sessions on topics chosen by the principal. All nine principals were replaced, and a five-member internal Apollo 20 team was created (composed of a School Improvement Officer, two Academic Program Managers, a Data Analyst, and a Secretary).

### More Instructional Time

The second strategy included adding more instructional time by lengthening the school year and the school day. This was accomplished by adding five days to the calendar in each of the first two years and lengthening the school day to 4:30 on Monday through Thursday. In addition, students behind in math and English/Language Arts (ELA) would receive twice the normal classroom instruction time in the area of highest need.

In its first year, the school year was lengthened by five days and the school day by one hour. In the second year, the school day was lengthened an additional five days, creating a 190-day school year. All Apollo 20 schools offer Saturday school and after-school tutoring, as well. Students in grades 7, 8, 10, 11, and 12 receive an additional period of math or ELA instruction each day.

### Use of Data to Drive Instruction

The goals for this strategy are summarized in HISD's plan for Apollo 20 as "a standards-based curriculum and assessment system." Here, HISD recognizes its belief in the potential of assessments to provide useful achievement information, as well as in standards to provide a framework for learning.

To implement these goals, HISD has performed monthly interim assessments and mid-year assessments using TAKS questions. The intent of the assessments is to identify areas of strength or weakness in math, ELA, and science.<sup>2</sup>

### High-dosage Tutoring

We mentioned earlier that particular grade levels receive more instruction in either math or

ELA. However, grades 6 and 9 were omitted. In Apollo 20 schools, students in these grades would receive in-school tutoring through the Math Fellows Program.

To this end, 254 Math Fellows were hired from 14 states, and 6th and 9th grade students receive 60-80 minutes of 2-on-1 math tutoring daily. Additionally, they complete three-week tutorial units that are capped with a test at the end of each one.

### A Culture of High Expectations for All

Finally, Apollo 20 sets rigorous standards for students and faculty alike. The plan calls for goals of a 100% graduation rate, 100% of students performing at or above their grade level, a 95% attendance rate among teachers and students, professional attire for staff, and a school-parent contract.

In response to these goals, the schools have implemented new attendance and behavior systems; made college a higher priority and focus by making it a part of the classroom environment and discussion; and provided incentive for perfect attendance, improvement, and other metrics.

### Criticisms

Despite optimism surrounding the program, there are those who are more skeptical. Peggy Sue Gay, president of the Carnegie Vanguard PTO and member of the HISD G.T. Parent Advisory and Task Force, calculates the per-pupil expenditure of the program as almost \$8,000. She cites declining enrollments in Apollo 20 schools because the program "declares a specific school as failing, thereby stigmatizing that school..." and that the program "[ignores] the thousands of at-risk students in every school in HISD." Her criticism is that the program is not scalable to the entirety of HISD. "Apollo 20's fundamental weakness has been that its approach is school specific and not student based."<sup>3</sup> Others echo her criticisms; however, the Apollo 20 report states that the program costs only an additional \$2,042 per student.<sup>1</sup>

### Early Results

On January 28, 2011, Superintendent Terry B. Grier submitted a report to the HISD Board of Education that concludes that the nine

<sup>1</sup>HISD Apollo 20 website: [hisd.org](http://hisd.org)

<sup>2</sup>[blueprintschools.org/Houston-fellow.php](http://blueprintschools.org/Houston-fellow.php)

<sup>3</sup>"Good Intentions, Few Results," Peggy Sue Gay, *chron.com*



### On the Record

*"The early indications from our Apollo 20 schools show that all students can achieve great academic gains when they attend schools with strong principals and excellent teachers who are willing to put in the extra work...It's too early to declare Apollo 20 a success but I can't help but be excited about the early student performance data we're seeing so far from these students."*

-Terry B. Grier  
HISD Superintendent  
January 28, 2011

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participating Apollo 20 schools “are showing great academic progress and are benefitting from high-quality tutors, increased expectations and strong leadership.” Grier goes on to say that “The early indications from our Apollo 20 schools show that all students can achieve great academic gains when they attend schools with strong principals and excellent teachers who are willing to put in the extra work...It’s too early to declare Apollo 20 a success but I can’t help but be excited about the early student performance data we’re seeing so far from these students.”<sup>1</sup>

HISD states that the first-year results show an average gain of 3-1/2 months of additional **math** learning as a result of the Apollo 20 program. It also estimated that sixth grade math tutoring students gained an additional six months’ worth of schooling and that ninth grade math tutoring students gained an additional five to nine months’ worth of schooling. **Reading** performance improved “slightly” in the schools; the results found that on average, students achieved results “roughly equal to or just less than a month of additional instruction.”<sup>1</sup> Additionally, HISD found attendance rate increases among all nine schools. HISD also found evidence that there were slightly fewer suspensions. In his report to the National Bureau of Economic Research, Dr. Fryer concludes that the gains from the Apollo 20 program are “strikingly similar” to those of prominent charters like the Harlem Children’s Zone or KIPP.

## Conclusion

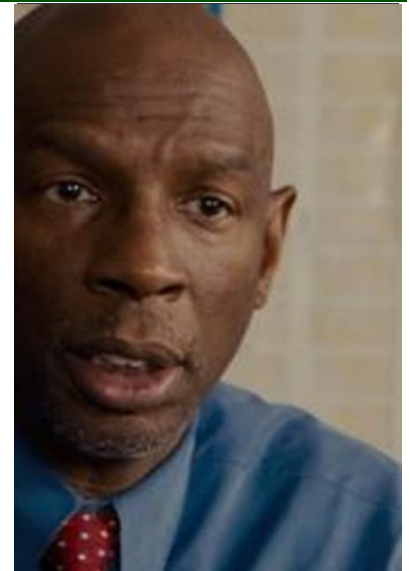
Dr. Roland Fryer states that one of primary motivators for Apollo 20 was to identify charter school success and translate them into scalable practices for public schools.<sup>1</sup> Now that the program has been implemented, Apollo 20 may prove instructive for other larger school districts seeking to improve the performance of their lowest-achieving schools.

Although it is true that Apollo 20 focuses on only a small number of Houston’s public schools, available evidence indicates that it has been successful in improving math achievement, increasing attendance rates, and decreasing suspensions. However, because the program has only existed for two years, and the eleven elementary schools have only completed one year, we cannot yet know the potential long-term effects of the program.

Mike Feinberg, cofounder of the KIPP school network and current superintendent of KIPP Houston schools, recently commented in *The Atlantic* that “Through the Apollo 20 program, leaders of chronically under-performing district schools are being given the same leeway to innovate and adapt on which charter school leaders rely. It’s a huge change from when Dave and I started as teachers, and it’s proof that districts can shake off the restrictions and limitations of the traditional bureaucracy.”<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup>HISD Apollo 20 website: [www.hisd.org](http://www.hisd.org)

<sup>4</sup>“Let Teachers Teach,” Mike Feinberg, [www.theatlantic.com](http://www.theatlantic.com)



## On the Record

*“I don’t want to pretend it’s going to be easy, but I am going to say it is absolutely doable. There is nothing I have heard that suggests to me that this won’t be successful, unless people give in or give up.”*

-Geoffrey Canada

President/CEO of Harlem  
Children’s Zone  
August 12, 2010  
at Key Middle School, one of  
five participating in Apollo 20