



Using Lexiles to Build a Community of Readers in Houston

Houston Independent School District (HISD) is no different from most major urban school systems. As the largest public school system in Texas and the seventh-largest in the United States, HISD faces the challenges of serving a socio-economically and ethnically diverse student population with a wide variety of learning abilities and educational needs. Under the leadership of Superintendent Abelardo Saavedra, Ph.D., the district is dedicated to giving every student the best possible education.

More than three years ago, Saavedra identified reading as a serious problem across the district, particularly at the secondary level. “Let’s face it, we all know that at HISD and elsewhere, there are high school students who have made it all the way to the upper grades and still do not read well,” he said. Then he set forth a challenge to the district’s leadership team: “We have to help those children. If we do not, we can’t expect them to graduate from high school and get good jobs in this community.”

That same summer, Jim Hundemer, HISD’s library services manager, attended the first Lexile National Reading Conference in Dallas. There, along with hundreds of his colleagues from Texas and around the country, Hundemer learned more about The Lexile Framework® for Reading and the power that it could have for helping improve student reading abilities at HISD.

The Lexile Framework provides a common, developmental scale for matching reader ability and text difficulty. Lexiles® enable educators, parents and students to select targeted materials that can improve reading skills and to monitor reading growth across the curriculum, in the library and at home. Recognized as the most widely adopted reading measure, Lexiles are part of reading and testing programs in the classroom and at the district and state levels. More than 100,000 books, 80 million articles and 60,000 Web sites have Lexile measures, and all major standardized tests can report student reading scores in Lexiles.

Many educators and administrators are also increasing efforts to meet the educational needs of Spanish-speaking students. Spanish Lexiles provide a powerful tool for targeting instruction and improving Hispanic achievement across grade levels and content

areas. El Sistema Lexile para Leer adds value to state or classroom Spanish-version assessments—adding more information, not more time. Spanish Lexile measures tie day-to-day class work to Spanish versions of high-stakes tests.

Starting Districtwide Change in the School Library

Overseeing HISD’s 256 school libraries, Hundemer relies on his council of advisors, made up of the top school librarians from around the district. The next time he met with the council he asked them, “How many of you know the reading levels of the kids in your schools? What are you doing to help your students build their reading abilities?”

“What Lexiles do so beautifully is give all kids a chance to show success.”

—Jim Hundemer, Manager, Library Services

When his council of advisors shook their heads and admitted they really didn’t have that kind of information, Hundemer described how Lexiles could help them get a handle on where their students were in terms of reading ability and how Lexiles could be used to help take them to the next level.

HISD students were, in most cases, already taking assessments that report Lexiles, including the state assessment, the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), the Stanford Achievement Test Series Tenth Edition (SAT 10) and Aprenda®: La prueba de logros en español, Tercera edición (Aprenda 3). The next step was to ensure that students’ Lexile measures were included on the assessment reports that the district received.

However, Hundemer also wanted to be sure that the district’s school librarians had students’ Lexile measures at their fingertips. He approached the team at Alexandria, the district’s library automation software provider. A field for a Lexile measure was added to each student’s library record, and suddenly school librarians had access to a powerful tool for connecting students with challenging reading materials.

“Our librarians would never deny a student a book that he or she had selected, but they

might suggest something more challenging,” said Hundemer. “If a student with a 1500L were trying to check out ‘Cat in the Hat,’ with a Lexile measure of 260L, the librarian might suggest a biography of Theodore Giesel—‘Dr. Seuss’—instead. By connecting students with appropriately challenging books, we can put them in the sweet zone for improving their reading abilities.”

Rather than taking on the daunting task of adding Lexile measures to all of the books in the collections at HISD’s 256 libraries, Hundemer worked with his vendors to ensure that all books being purchased by the district have Lexile measures. When new titles are added to the collections, the records that go into the library’s automated card catalog include the Lexile measures. To date, more than 40 percent of the district’s school library materials have Lexiles. “Quite frankly, the students are checking out the newer books more often than the older ones so in most cases we are putting Lexiled materials in their hands,” he said.

As Hundemer negotiated the next year’s purchase of information databases for HISD school libraries, Lexiles became a part of the discussion as well. When he talked with companies, such as EBSCO and Grolier, he told them that he wanted to purchase databases that provided Lexile measures for its articles so teachers and librarians could use Lexiles to differentiate instruction.

“What Lexiles do so beautifully is give all kids a chance to show success,” he said. “If they are studying photosynthesis, you can connect them with articles that match their reading abilities, and they can participate in class discussions on the topic, no matter what their reading levels might be. That is powerful.”

By the end of the first year after he attended the Lexile conference, Hundemer and his team of school librarians had made Lexiles part of the school library program at HISD. “We knew where every HISD student was in terms of reading ability,” he said proudly.

Making Lexiles Part of Teaching and Learning Throughout HISD

Hundemer also knew that for HISD to realize the true potential of Lexiles, the measures had to become a part of teaching and learning in every classroom across the district. “We had embarked on a journey that started

with learning about the concept of Lexiles and would be completed when they were institutionalized as part of daily instruction," he said.

That is when Tina Angelo became the manager of the district's new office of adolescent literacy. "The first thing I did when I took my new position was to meet with library services," said Angelo. "It is just logical. You can't build literacy without libraries."

And when she learned about Lexiles, they became her mantra when she met with her new district supervisor, Chief Academic Officer Karen Soehnge, Ph.D.

"We worked together to develop a plan to reach out to all stakeholders with the power of Lexiles," Angelo said. The plan included developing a Lexile Web site for parents, a custom HISD Lexile map, and training and workshops to help teachers and administrators understand how to use Lexiles in the classroom.

With the foundation that Hundemer and the library team had laid, HISD took Lexiles to the next level. The district formed a District Lexile Initiative Committee, with representatives from curriculum, professional development, multilingual, special education, support services, student information systems, the regional offices and, of course, library services. All of these stakeholders brought different needs and questions to the table.

"We want to make Lexiles something that is easy for teachers to use, not just another thing to do. We want Lexiles integrated with what we already have."

The committee created a vision statement that serves as a filter for everything it does: "To use the Lexile tool to improve reading and differentiate instruction so that all students achieve."

It was decided that rolling out Lexiles to HISD's 13,000 teachers would be a three-year process. The first year would be an awareness phase—simply getting the teachers to understand what Lexiles are. The second year would involve training teachers to use Lexiles to support instruction, and the third year would be the full implementation phase.

In the awareness phase, the committee developed a 30-minute workshop to introduce teachers to Lexiles. Angelo said, "Our regional office managers told us that we needed to make this training part of regular school faculty or department meetings, so we developed a workshop that was intentionally short and general."

Using a teleconference, Angelo trained 600 teachers, including many school librarians, who would deliver the introduction to Lexiles workshops throughout the district. The teleconference was opened by Chief Academic Officer Soehnge, and Angelo attributes the success of the first phase of the districtwide rollout of Lexiles to Soehnge's support.

"Literacy has a lot to do with equal opportunity for all students," Soehnge said. "This is very important work you are doing because if students can't read, they can't work."

In her enthusiastic introduction, Soehnge also expressed excitement for eventually extending the power of Lexiles to the entire Houston community—to parents, the public libraries and local bookstores.

The trainers who participated in the teleconference took what they had learned and spent the rest of the 2006–2007 school year raising HISD teachers' awareness of Lexiles.

Extending Lexiles to the Greater Houston Community

Meanwhile, the District Lexile Initiative Committee was busy with other efforts to institutionalize the use of Lexiles at HISD. The district's technology team worked with the developers of its student information system, Chancery SMS, to have a field for Lexile measures added to all student records, putting that vital information at educators' fingertips—not just the school librarians'. Plans were made for phase two of the implementation with the development of online training modules; teleconference training from MetaMetrics®, Inc., developer of the Lexile Framework; and more training for teachers, administrators and parents during the 2007–2008 school year.

As a result of the committee's efforts and the district leadership's commitment to making Lexiles a part of the culture of the Houston community, fewer than nine months after she introduced the train-the-trainers teleconference, Soehnge's vision became a reality. All HISD students went home for summer break with custom English and Spanish Lexile maps—essentially summer reading lists—accompanied by a letter to parents from Superintendent Saavedra. In it, he explained the Lexiles concept and how to use the measures to select books that could help students improve reading skills over the summer.

What started with Hundemer and the district's library services team now has the potential to improve the reading ability of every student in Houston. "With Lexiles, we

are making real change at HISD," concluded Hundemer. "And we have the potential to change our entire community."

The largest public school system in Texas and the seventh-largest in the United States, **Houston Independent School District** serves more than 202,000 students in more than 300 schools.

Benefits of Using Lexiles

- Large urban district has one shared measure for evaluating student reading ability
- School librarians and teachers are able to match students with appropriately challenging reading material
- Teachers can differentiate instruction, leveling the learning playing field for all students
- Parents are connecting their children with books that match their reading abilities

For more information on how The Lexile Framework for Reading can help to link assessment with instruction and improve the reading abilities of all students, call **1-888-LEXILES** or visit **www.MetaMetricsInc.com**.



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