HOUSTON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

RESEARCH

Educational Program Report

PART II: ELEMENTARY AND SECONDARY SCHOOL EMERGENCY RELIEF (ESSER) II AND III EVALUATION OF CAMPUS PROGRAMS, 2021-2022

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EVALUATION REPORT
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Part II: Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) II and III Evaluation of Campus Programs, 2021–2022

Prepared by Christopher Barnes, Ph.D.

Introduction

Beginning in fall 2021, the Houston Independent School District (Houston ISD) received more than $1.2 billion dollars across three ESSER grants to address student learning loss that may have occurred due to the COVID-19 pandemic. ESSER II and III funds, the focus of this report, were divided into multiple spending categories by the district. These categories include:

- **Campus-Based Tutoring** – Funding designated to support the implementation of campus-based tutoring services as required by House Bill (HB) 4545. All Houston ISD students who failed the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) End-of-Course (EOC) and/or STAAR STAAR 3–8 subject tests were required to complete 30 hours of campus-based tutoring per failed subject test. Schools used campus-based tutoring funds to purchase or support payroll (e.g., extra duty pay/overtime), contracted services (e.g., tutoring vendors), and materials/supplies (e.g., textbooks).
- **Campus Innovation Allotment** – A one-time allocation of ESSER funds was dispersed to every Houston ISD school to address COVID-19 learning loss based on each campus's specific community needs (not already addressed with district-based ESSER funds). These funds had to be spent by June 30, 2022 and were used to purchase or support staff payroll (e.g., extra duty pay/overtime for personnel), contracted services (e.g., consulting services, etc.), and materials/supplies (e.g., reading/testing materials, etc.).
- **Expanded Counselors and Social Workers** – Funds allocated to Houston ISD campuses, who did not previously have a counselor or social worker, to hire one counselor or social worker. These positions were funded for a 1-year term and evaluated during the 2021–2022 school year to determine if the position would continue to be funded for, up to, an additional two years.
- **Expanded Wraparound Services** – Funding provided to campuses to improve the health and wellness of children by providing wraparound services designed to positively influence students' ability to learn. Campuses used this money to provide services like after-school enrichment activities, transportation to after-school enrichment activities, school uniforms, and hygiene items.
- **Response to Intervention (RTI) Reading and Math Interventions** – Funding was dispersed to all elementary and K-8 campuses to further support students receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention assistance. These students were identified via a district-wide RTI list posted to Houston ISD's PowerSchool Student Information System. Campuses used these funds to hire Intervention Teachers to provide interventions to students on the district-wide RTI list.
- **SAT/ACT/TSI Preparation** – Funding granted to Houston ISD high schools to provide tutorial support for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), American College Test (ACT), and Texas Success Initiative (TSI) assessment. Campuses used the money to hire third-party tutors, provide extra-duty compensation for teachers (who served as tutors), and purchase testing materials (e.g., textbooks).

There were two purposes of this report. The first

purpose was to explore how Houston ISD used its ESSER funds to address student learning loss because of COVID-19. This was achieved by analyzing budget reports that disclosed how much ESSER funding was dispersed/spent as well as the type of items/services purchased by campus. The second purpose was to track the campus-level performance of Houston ISD students over time using a variety of outcome measures connected to each of the six ESSER programs discussed above. These outcome measures included STAAR test results, Renaissance 360 test results, ACT results, SAT results, student attendance data, and student discipline data. See **Tables 1**–**5** (pps. 5–9) below for clickable images of the eight Microsoft Power BI dashboards displaying budget and student performance information related to these six ESSER programs.

Background

The Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief (ESSER) grants are a series of one-time federal awards designed to assist Local Education Agencies (LEAs) in "prevent[ing], prepar[ing] for, or respond[ing] to the COVID-19 pandemic, including its impact on the social emotional, mental health, and academic needs of students" (Texas Education Agency, n.d., p. 10). There are three ESSER grants in total. These grants include the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Socioeconomic Security (CARES) Act ESSER I, Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations (CRSSA) Act ESSER II, and American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act ESSER III (Houston Independent School District, n.d. -a). The state of Texas was awarded more than $19 billion in ESSER funding by the federal government.

Houston ISD received nearly $82 million in ESSER I funds, $358 million in ESSER II funds, and $804 million in ESSER III funds. In accordance with state policy, Houston ISD used a portion of its ESSER II funds to fulfill requirements of a recently passed House Bill.

On June 25, 2021, House Bill 4545 was implemented by the 87th Regular Legislative Session in the state of Texas. HB 4545 requires school districts to provide 30-hours of supplemental accelerated instruction, per subject, to every student who failed at least one STAAR subject exam in spring 2021. Districts were prompted by the state to use their ESSER funding to support supplemental accelerated instruction. The Texas Education Agency described supplemental accelerated instruction as support that involved Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS)-aligned instruction occurring in a one-on-one or small group (of no more than three students) environment (Texas Education Agency, 2021). Houston ISD's Campus-Based Tutoring category was used to fulfill the requirements of HB 4545.

Overall, the intention of ESSER funds, within Houston ISD, were to offset financial loss (due to reduced average daily attendance), fund special programs, and develop plans for addressing learning loss as well as fostering a safe return to sustained in-person instruction for students. As Houston ISD sought to recover from the COVID-19 pandemic, the ESSER grants served a crucial role in allowing the district to "equitably educate the whole child so that every student graduates with the tools to reach their full potential" (Houston Independent School District, n.d. -b, para. 1).

Review of the Literature

The COVID-19 pandemic prompted global school closures (Martin & Sorensen, 2020) and simultaneously obliterated a decade of educational progress nationwide (Betebenner & Wenning, 2021). Recent studies, however, have identified practices that can improve student learning loss resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic fallout. The infusion of financial support from the U.S. government in the form of ESSER funds has allowed school districts to implement these practices which are designed to mitigate learning loss and be implemented at the elementary and secondary education levels. They include tutoring for students and professional learning/collaboration for teachers (Miles, 2021).

Frequent small group tutoring sessions have been identified as one direct approach schools can use to address student learning loss. In-person tutoring that occurs during class has been identified, among various styles of tutoring programs, as one of the most effective strategies to mitigate learning loss (Nickow et al., 2020). Other strategies, such as online tutoring, have been found to be less effective but more cost efficient than in-person tutoring (Dorn et al. 2020, Kraft et al., 2022). To keep costs down, but performance up, Dorn et al. (2020) recommends employing younger professionals (e.g., recent college graduates) to provide small group, in-person tutoring during the school day.

Increased spending on Professional Development (PD) for teachers is another recommendation for addressing learning loss. In general, PD has been labeled complex (Guskey & Yoon, 2009) and viewed as a practice that infrequently contributes to improved teaching. When specialized to include high-quality/culturally-relevant teaching materials, however, PD can positively influence student literacy (Porche et al., 2012) and increase a teacher's ability to engage students in ways that meet the students distinct learning needs (Miles, 2021).

For this report, the primary focus was analyzing the academic performance of students who received ESSER-funded academic support. Although the academic support was diverse in nature, it primarily consisted of tutoring support for children who were identified by the district as needing RTI intervention, supplemental accelerated instruction, and/or college readiness preparation.

Methods

All data in this report pertains to the 2018–2019, 2020–

2021, and/or 2021–2022 school years. Test data (i.e., average scale scores, count of students tested, and sum of tests passed) were collected at the student-level from Houston ISD's Cognos PWR and DISTRICT SPA Reporting Environment. Student attendance and discipline data were gathered from Houston ISD's OnDataSuite Information Management System. Student demographic data (i.e., ethnicity, gender, and economically-disadvantaged status) were extracted from the Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS).

After test and demographic data were merged into one file, Microsoft Excel was utilized to convert the results into campus-level data for use within Microsoft Power BI. For the Campus-based Tutoring dashboard, STAAR 3–8/EOC test and PEIMS demographic data were aligned with students on the Accelerated Learning Required (ALR) list via matching student identification numbers. The ALR list was used to determine which students required supplemental accelerated instruction. For the RTI Reading and Math Interventions dashboard, Renaissance 360 test and PEIMS demographic data were aligned with students on the RTI list via matching student identification numbers.

Limitations

There were two broader limitations of this report. These limitations included missing or inconsistent data collected/reported and inconsistent district-wide policy implementation.

Missing or inconsistent data collected and/or reported - Not all students who completed Renaissance 360 exams were provided a District Benchmark and Percentile Rank. A total of 43 BOY test-takers had scale scores but no District Benchmark indicator and Percentile Rank. A total of 30 Renaissance 360 EOY test-takers had scale scores but no District Benchmark and Percentile Rank reported. Students who did not have a District Benchmark and/or Percentile Rank were removed from the data. Test scores were acquired from Cognos while demographic details were extracted from PEIMS. Students without PEIMS demographic data appeared in the dashboards as "unknown" students. The dashboards exclude data pertaining to the 2019–2020 school year because no STAAR exams were administered that year. Additionally, STAAR tests were optional during the 2020–2021 school year (resulting in a decrease in the count of exams administered). SAT scores for the 2021–2022 school year were available at the time of this report, but ACT scores were not – resulting in only two years of ACT scores being reported in comparison to three years of SAT scores. Additionally, SAT/ACT data for 2018–2019 and 2020–2021 only included results from the senior class of those years (i.e., Class of 2019 and Class of 2021), while data from 2021–2022 pertained to all SAT student-testers despite graduating class.

Inconsistent district-wide policy implementation - While campuses intended to provide supplemental accelerated instruction for required students, the exact type of supplemental accelerated instruction provided at each school was unknown. It was also unknown if each student in the district, required to receive supplemental accelerated instruction, actually received that type of instruction. Supplemental accelerated instruction looked different from one campus to another and its style could have influenced student performance just as much as not receiving accelerated instruction at all. Some campuses had the ability to provide tutoring sessions during and after school, while other campuses could only support tutoring sessions during school. Not all campuses, eligible to hire Math/Reading Intervention Teachers, hired these teachers during the 2021–2022 school year for various reasons. Furthermore, not all Intervention Teachers began their positions at the beginning of the school year. Some teachers were hired in September 2021, while others were hired in January 2022.

Recommendations

At the time of this evaluation, less than 45% of the $108 million dollars allocated to schools (via the above ESSER programs), had been spent. Findings from a recent Houston ISD princpal survey note two suggestions for how the district can positively encourage campuses to spend their ESSER funds.

- The first recommendation is to enhance the approval/tracking process for vendors and items purchased from vendors. Suggestions for enhancing this process include setting a routine schedule for updating approved vendors/items as well as communicating this schedule with campuses, and more efficiently communicating the approval or denial of a purchaser's shopping cart.
- The second recommendation is to improve the hiring processes of ESSER-funded positions. This can be accomplished by giving applicants more flexibility regarding the type/amount of previous experience needed for these roles, allowing schools to hire current on-campus staff, and advertising the possibility of permanent employment opportunities (within Houston ISD) via marketing materials for the "limited term" positions.

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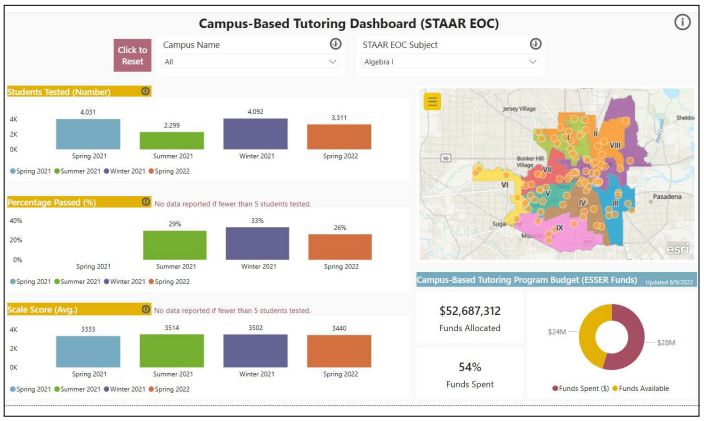
Table 1. Campus-Based Tutoring

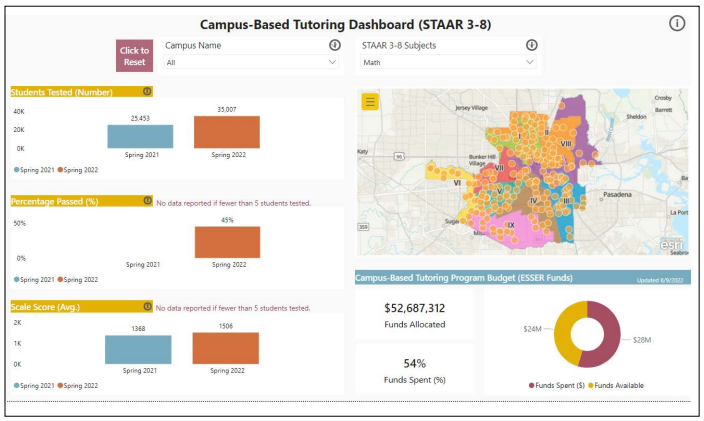
Purpose

Funding was designated to support the implementation of Campus-Based Tutoring services as required by House Bill (HB) 4545. All Houston ISD students who failed STAAR End-of-Course (EOC) and/or STAAR 3–8 subject tests were required to complete 30 hours of campus-based tutoring per failed subject test. Schools used campus-based tutoring funds to purchase or support payroll (e.g., extra duty pay/overtime), contracted services (e.g., tutoring vendors), and materials/supplies (e.g., textbooks).

STAAR EOC Subjects Dashboard



STAAR 3–8 Subjects Dashboard



Dashboard Description (Click images to view interactive dashboards)

The homepages for Table 1 display campus-level STAAR EOC (all subjects) and STAAR 3–8 (Math and Reading) results for students, requiring supplemental accelerated instruction, from spring 2021 through spring 2022. Students requiring supplemental accelerated instruction were those who failed at least one STAAR EOC/3–8 subject test in spring 2021. Only students who completed a STAAR subject test are displayed in dashboards. Budget data (e.g., funds allocated, percentage of funds spent, dollar amount of funds spent, and funds available), related to Campus-Based Tutoring, are also shown in the bottom right corner of the homepage. Within a series of secondary pages, STAAR EOC/3–8 results (e.g., number of students tested, percentage of students passed, and average scale scores) are disaggregated by ethnicity, gender, grade level (3–8 only), and economically-disadvantaged status.

Key Findings (STAAR EOC)

- A total of 15,957 STAAR EOC subject tests were taken by students on the ALR list in spring 2021, whereas; a total of 14,452 STAAR EOC subject tests were completed by students on the ALR list in spring 2022.
- The mean scale score for all subjects increased from spring 2021 to spring 2022. The largest increase occurred for U.S. History test-takers (3302 to 3545), while the smallest increase occurred for Algebra I test-takers (3308 to 3397).
- The passing percentage of all subject tests in spring 2022 was 30%. The subject test with the highest percentage of passers was Biology (43%), while the subject with the lowest percentage of passers was English I (21%).

Key Findings (STAAR 3-8)

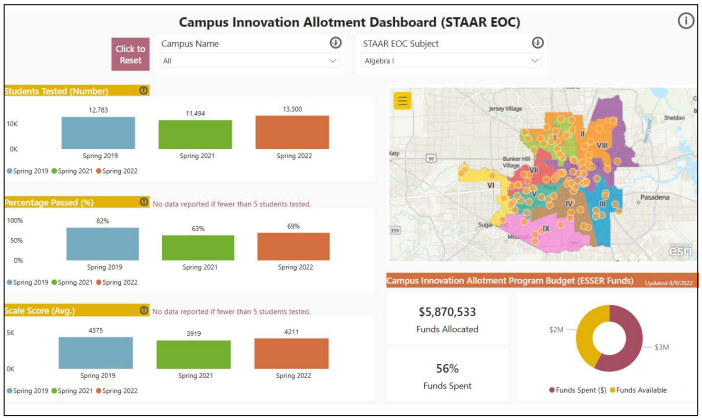
- A total of 25,453 students, from the ALR list, completed a STAAR math test in spring 2021 in comparison to 35,007 students in spring 2022. A total of 21,280 students, from the ALR list, completed a STAAR reading test in spring 2021 in comparison to 30,534 students in spring 2022.
- The mean scale scores of all student test-takers increased between spring 2021 and spring 2022 on both STAAR reading and math tests. The largest increase occurred on the STAAR math test (1368 to 1506, respectively).
- More than 50% of fifth-, seventh-, and eight-graders passed the reading exam in spring 2022. More than half of fifth-graders and eight-graders passed the math exam in spring 2022. Grade three had the lowest percentage of students who passed the STAAR math (18%) and reading (20%) tests of any grade level.

Table 2. Campus Innovation Allotment

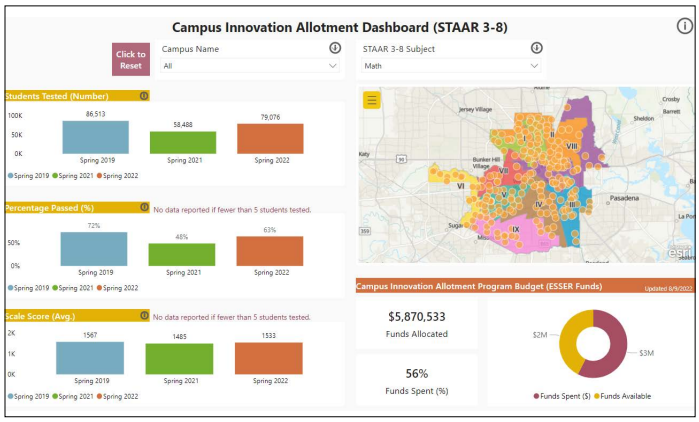
Purpose

A one-time allocation of ESSER funds was dispersed to every Houston ISD school to address COVID learning loss based on each campus's specific community needs (not already addressed with district-based ESSER funds). These funds had to be spent by June 30, 2022 and were used to purchase or support staff payroll (e.g., extra duty pay/overtime for personnel), contracted services (e.g., consulting services, etc.), and materials/supplies (e.g., reading/testing materials, etc.).

STAAR EOC Subjects Dashboard



STAAR 3–8 Subjects Dashboard



Dashboard Description (Click images to view interactive dashboards)

The homepages for Table 2 display campus-level STAAR EOC results and STAAR 3–8 results for all first-time testers during the 2018–2019, 2020–2021, and 2021–2022 school years. Budget data (e.g., funds allocated, percentage of funds spent, dollar amount of funds spent, and funds available), related to Campus Innovation Allotment, are also shown in the bottom right corner of the homepage. Within a series of secondary pages, test results (e.g., number of students tested, percentage of students meeting college-ready benchmark, and average composite scores) are disaggregated by ethnicity, gender, grade level (3–8 only), and economically-disadvantaged status.

Key Findings (STAAR EOC)

- A total of 62,808 STAAR EOC subject tests were completed by all students in spring 2019, whereas; a total of 56,498 subject tests were completed in spring 2021 and 64,917 subject tests were completed in spring 2022.
- The mean scale score for test-takers of all subjects, except English I, increased between spring 2021 and spring 2022. The largest increase occurred for Algebra I test-takers (3908 to 4203), while the score of English I test-takers decreased by 42 points (3978 to 3935).
- The passing rate of all subject tests increased by 3 percentage points between spring 2021 (70%) and spring 2022 (73%). The largest increase, by percentage, occurred between Algebra I test-takers (from 63% to 69%). The largest decrease, by percentage, occurred between English I test-takers (from 64% to 62%).

Key Findings (STAAR 3-8)

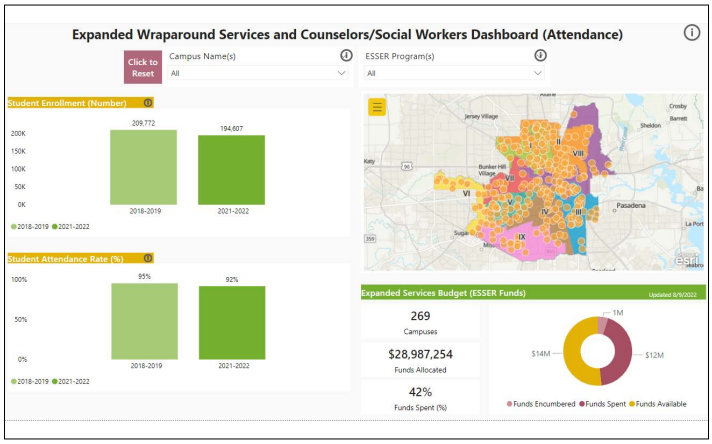
- A total of 249,093 STAAR 3–8 subject tests were completed by all students in spring 2019, whereas; a total of 166,597 subject tests were completed in spring 2021 and 201,423 subject tests were completed in spring 2022.
- The mean scale score for test-takers of all subjects increased from spring 2021 to spring 2022. The largest increase occurred for science test-takers (3547 to 3700), while the smallest increase occurred for math test-takers (1484 to 1532).
- The passing rate on all subject tests increased by 14 percentage points between spring 2021 (51%) and spring 2022 (65%). The largest increase, by percentage, occurred between math test-takers (from 48% to 63%). The smallest increase, by percentage, occurred between social studies test-takers (from 37% to 48%).

Table 3. Expanded Counselors/Social Workers and Wraparound Services

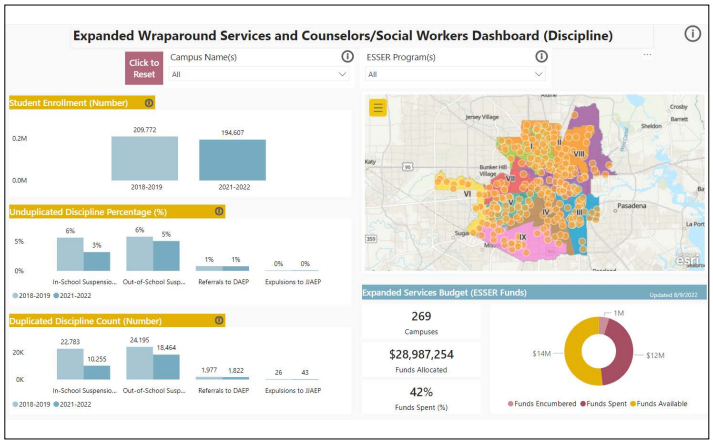
Purpose

These funds were used by campuses to hire one Counselor/Social Worker, and provide Wraparound Services designed to positively influence students' ability to learn. Wraparound services included, but were not limited to; afterschool enrichment activities, transportation to afterschool enrichment activities, school uniforms, and hygiene items.

Attendance Dashboard



Discipline Dashboard



Dashboard Descriptions (Click images to view interactive dashboards)

Attendance - This homepage for Table 3 displays attendance data for all Houston ISD campuses during the 2018–2019 and 2021–2022 school years. Budget data (e.g., funds allocated, percentage of funds spent, dollar amount of funds spent, and funds available), related to Expanded Wraparound Services and Counselors/Social Workers, are also shown in the bottom right corner of the homepage. Within a series of secondary pages, attendance data (e.g., number of students enrolled and student attendance rate) are disaggregated by ethnicity, gender, grade level (3–8 only), and economically-disadvantaged status.

Discipline - This homepage for Table 3 displays discipline data for all Houston ISD campuses during the 2018–2019 and 2021–2022 school years. Budget data (e.g., funds allocated, percentage of funds spent, dollar amount of funds spent, and funds available), related to Expanded Wraparound Services and Counselors/Social Workers, are also shown in the bottom right corner of the homepage. Within a series of secondary pages, discipline data (e.g., number of students enrolled, percentage of students disciplined, and number of discipline incidents) are disaggregated by ethnicity, gender, grade level (3–8 only), and economically-disadvantaged status.

Key Findings

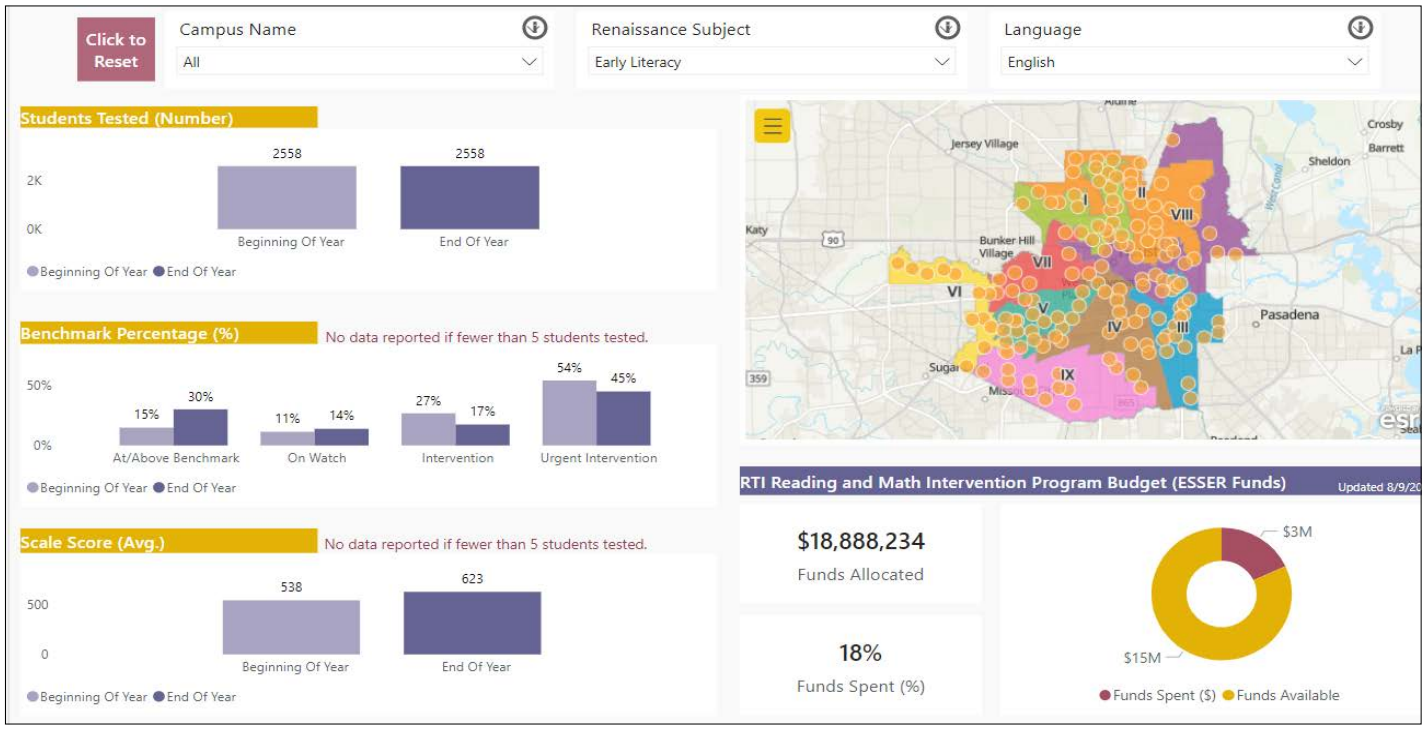
- A total of 194,607 students were enrolled across 273 Houston ISD campuses in the 2021–2022 school year, which was down from 209,772 students enrolled across 279 Houston ISD campuses during the 2018–2019 school year. These numbers were used to calculate attendance and discipline rates for both school years.
- The average attendance rate for all Houston ISD campuses fell from 95.3% in 2018–2019 to 91.6% in 2021–2022.
- The overall in-school suspension (ISS) rate decreased by 2 percentage points between 2018–2019 and 2021–2022 (5% to 3%), while the out-of-school suspension (OSS) rate decreased by 1 percentage point during the same period (6% to 5%).
- Between 2018–2019 and 2021–2022, Black students saw their ISS (37% vs. 35%) and OSS (48% vs. 45%) rates decrease, but were the only ethnic group whose ISS and OSS rates were disproportionately higher than their enrollment rate for both years (23% and 22%, respectively). During this period, Hispanic students saw their ISS (59% to 61%) and OSS (48% to 51%) rates increase, while Asian and White students saw their ISS (.8% to .7% and 2.7% to 2.4%, respectively) and OSS (.5% to .5% and 2.7% to 2.6%, respectively) rates slightly decrease.
- While the number of students referred to Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEPs) slightly decreased from 2018–2019 to 2021–2022 (1,726 vs. 1,540), the number of students expelled to Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Programs (JJAEPs) slightly increased (26 vs. 42).

Table 4. Response to Intervention (RTI) Reading and Math Intervention

Purpose

RTI Reading and Math Intervention funding was dispersed to all elementary and K-8 campuses to further support students receiving Tier 2 or Tier 3 intervention assistance. These students were identified via a districtwide RTI list posted to Houston ISD's PowerSchool Student Information System. Campuses used these funds to hire Intervention Teachers to provide intervention assistance to students on the districtwide RTI list.

RTI Reading and Math Intervention Dashboard



Dashboard Description (Click image to view interactive dashboard)

The homepage for Table 4 displays Renaissance 360 test results by campus, from the 2021–2022 school year, for Houston ISD students identified as needing additional reading and math intervention. Budget data (e.g., funds allocated, percentage of funds spent, dollar amount of funds spent, and funds available), related to RTI Reading and Math Intervention, are also shown in the bottom right corner of the homepage. Within a series of secondary pages, test results (e.g., number of students tested, At/Above Benchmark percentage, and scale score averages) are disaggregated by ethnicity, gender, grade level, and economically-disadvantaged status.

Key Findings

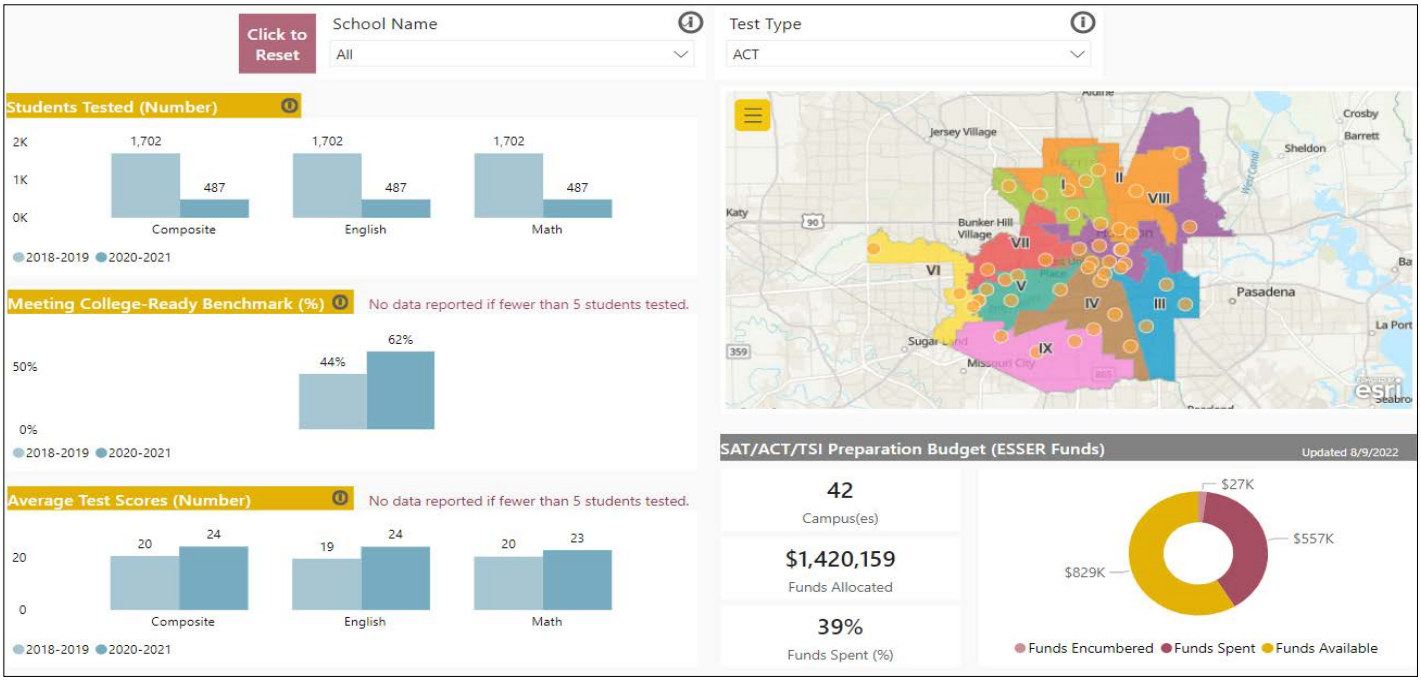
- A total of 97,100 students completed a Renaissance 360 BOY and EOY test during the 2021–2022 school year. Approximately 12% of these students completed the Spanish version of the exam, while the remaining 88% completed the English version of the exam.
- The majority of student test-takers, who completed the English exam, were economically-disadvantaged Hispanic males in the fifth grade. The majority of student test-takers, who completed the Spanish exam, were economically-disadvantaged Hispanic males in the third grade.
- The mean scale score for English test-takers increased between the BOY and EOY testing windows for Early Literacy (from 538 to 622), Math (from 571 to 622), and Reading (from 369 to 427). The mean scale score for Spanish test-takers increased between the BOY and EOY testing windows for Early Literacy (from 505 to 591), Math (from 311 to 409), and Reading (from 140 to 186).
- The At/Above Benchmark percentage rate of English test-takers (across all subjects) increased from 18% at the beginning of the year to 26% at the end of the year. The At/Above Benchmark percentage rate of Spanish test-takers (across all subjects) increased from 26% at the beginning of the year to 44% at the end of the year.

Table 5. SAT/ACT/TSI Preparation

Purpose

Funding was granted to Houston ISD high schools to provide tutorial support for the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT), American College Test (ACT), and Texas Success Initiative (TSI) assessment. Campuses used the money to hire third-party tutors, provide extra-duty compensation for teachers (who served as tutors), and purchase testing materials (e.g., textbooks).

SAT/ACT/TSI Prepartion Dashboard



Dashboard Description (Click image to view interactive dashboard)

The homepage for Table 5 displays SAT and ACT results of Houston ISD students during the 2018–2019, 2020–2021, and 2021–2022 school years by campus. The 2018–2019 and 2020–2021 results pertain to the Classes of 2019 and 2021, while the 2021–2022 results reflect all Houston ISD students who tested that year. Budget data (e.g., funds allocated, percentage of funds spent, dollar amount of funds spent, and funds available), related to SAT/ACT/TSI Preparation, are also shown in the bottom right corner of the homepage. Within a series of secondary pages, test results (e.g., number of students tested, percentage of students meeting college-ready benchmark, and average composite scores) are disaggregated by ethnicity, gender, and economically-disadvantaged status.

Caution should be applied while comparing SAT/ACT data across the 2018–2019, 2020–2021, and 2021–2022 school years. The number of students tested in 2020 was negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. While SAT data in 2018–2019 and 2020–2021 pertained only to the senior classes of those years, SAT data from 2021–2022 included all testers across the district. Additionally, the 2022 ACT scores were not available at the time of this report.

Key Findings

- SAT student-testers decreased from 10,183 during the 2018–2019 school year to 7,189 in the 2020–2021 school year, while ACT student-testers decreased from 1,702 to 487 during the same period. A total of 15,261 students completed the SAT during the 2021–2022 school year.
- The percentage of students considered college-ready, based on SAT scores, increased from 25% in 2019 to 27% in 2021. The percentage of students considered college-ready, based on ACT scores, increased from 44% in 2019 to 63% in 2021. In 2022, approximately 22% of SAT student-testers were considered college-ready.
- The average SAT composite score increased by 9 points between 2019 (949) and 2021 (958), while the average ACT composite score increased from 22 to 25 during the same period. The average SAT composite score in 2022 was 935.