

# Success Beyond State Tests

## Preparing Students for Success in Real Life



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RIGOROUS LEARNING FOR ALL STUDENTS

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Unlike the standardized tests we're preparing our students for, life is multi-faceted, often ambiguous, and there's rarely one clean-cut solution to any one problem. Life and work require complex thinking for complex challenges. Our interconnected, digital world is constantly presenting new problems and they demand new, creative solutions.

One of those new problems is disentangling ourselves from our misguided and growing obsession with state tests. We've reached an inflection point in the conversation around state tests. There's recognition that way too much focus is put on state tests. Thanks to a recent report from the Council of the Great City Schools (CGCS) that looked at two years of K-12 state testing data and deemed state tests "redundant" and "not strategic," we're finally beginning to say publicly that their meaning and use are overstated (Hart, Casserly, Uzzell, Palacios, Corcoran & Spurgeon, 2015). But all we've done on the national level is shift the conversation to how to "fix" state tests (yet again), how to determine which tests are "high quality," and how to administer only those "worth taking" (Moser, 2015). That approach is an old solution to a newly serious problem.

What's going on here is what I call the "lawn mower effect." Just before a lawn mower is about to die, an influx of air creates a burst of energy that jolts it forward. And then it gives out. I believe we're witnessing the lawn mower effect play out with state tests. The CGCS report was that final influx of air. Now we're having one last rush of conversation about how to fix the state tests—one last attempt to work within its system—before it gives out. For good.

In significant numbers, people are finally admitting that teaching to the test is teaching to an unrealistic, one-dimensional world. And worse, creating one-dimensional students, unrealistically prepared for the real world. When we over-emphasize the test, we under-emphasize the skills that a person actually needs to survive and thrive in today's world.

### Looking Beyond the Test

If we're not teaching to the test, then to what do we teach? If we're not measuring student learning by test scores, then how can we measure student progress? How do we monitor teacher performance? School and district performance?

Much like life, the answers to these questions are neither finite nor clear. In many ways, we're facing a new challenge and must forge a new path forward. To begin, we have to ask ourselves what it takes to be successful in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. What skills must a person have to manage life and careers in our world? From there, we can begin to back into what the post-test-centric world of learning can look like.

To negotiate life in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, our students need to be able to connect seemingly disparate dots to unearth hidden connections. They need analytical skills that allow them to consider a situation from multiple angles. They need to understand that creative thinking can be applied to everything, not just so-called creative fields, like art and design. They need to be able to collaborate with others with different skillsets to gather information, merge ideas, and create new ones. And most of all, they need patience and grit as they work through complicated situations.

In his book, *The Tipping Point*, Malcolm Gladwell mainstreamed the diffusion theory of professor and researcher Everett Rogers, which had been largely concentrated within technology and sociological circles. The diffusion theory suggests how, why, and at what rate a new technology takes hold and spreads through a group or population (Orr, 2003). In the diffusion model below, the blue line shows the successive order of product adoption by group. The yellow line shows market share as adoption grows.

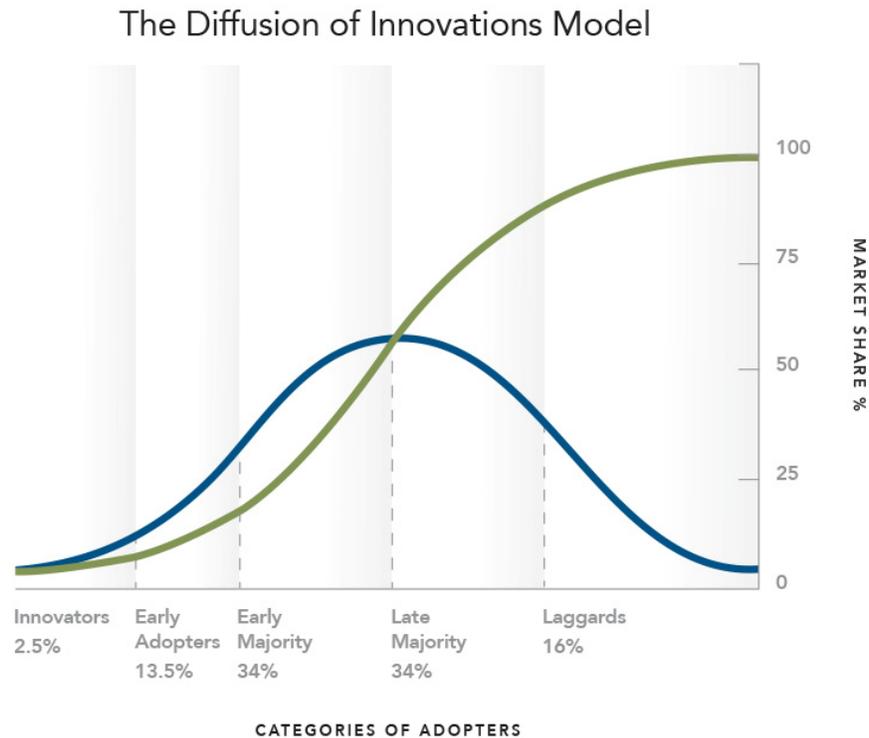


Image based on *Diffusion of Innovations* by Everett Rogers, Ph.D.

Gladwell expanded on the theory with the idea of the “tipping point,” or that “magic moment when an idea, trend, or social behavior crosses a threshold, tips, and spreads like wildfire” (Gladwell, 2000). The tipping point happens in the early adopter stage.

In the diffusion theory model, when it comes to the conversation around the limitations and drawbacks of standardized tests, we have tipped and are reaching saturation. When it comes to actually breaking free from the confines of the standardized test and replacing it with something more realistic, we are in the innovator stage. While education must be re-envisioned, it cannot be compared to adoption of, say, the iPhone; we education innovators are doing the messy work, not just buying a product.

This means the conversation about a post-test-centric model is just beginning. We have to realize where we are and where we want to go. Where we want to go is someplace new—we are literally creating the end goal and the path to it. Thus, we have to be willing to experiment, take chances, fail, and even ruffle some feathers along the way. We’d all be wise to look to those bold innovators already hacking down the brush for their ideas, insights, and lessons learned.

## **Observations from an Innovator**

One of those innovators is Humble Independent School District (HISD) in Texas. Under the thoughtful leadership of Superintendent Guy Sconzo, HISD has emerged from shackles of state test obsession and into a model of learning that teaches the whole child. HISD honors the world of talents that exist outside being able to fill in the right bubble.

For 15 years, HISD has implemented a series of strategies built to advance its mission of teaching to the well-rounded student—not to the test. In his own words below, Dr. Sconzo shares ideas, insights and lessons that he and his team have collected as they’ve successfully tipped the scales in their district away from success on the test and toward success in life:

### ***Commit***

If you’re going to do it, do it. There will be pushback, doubts, and fears. Any crack in the armor will bust right open without a wholesale, district-wide commitment to preparing all students for *life*—not a test. The armor is the message. Know why you’re undertaking efforts to teach the whole child and be able to articulate your end goal to multiple different audiences. Communicate it calmly, clearly, and constantly.

### ***Create a Culture of Trust***

People are going to be afraid to loosen their grasp on state tests. It is, after all, the root of all evaluations. It’s leadership’s job to put the “significance” of tests in perspective. We do this by repeatedly banging the drum of our overarching belief: *If we are educating our students to pass a state test, then—guaranteed—they will not be successful in life.*

As a leadership team, we go out of our way to hammer this core belief home to all stakeholders, from principals to parents. To create space for new instruction aimed at soft skills, creative thinking skills, collaborative skills, to name a few, we all had to take a leap of faith together. We could not have pulled this off without first earning trust that we sincerely believed our larger aim was far more important than any test could ever be and would act and evaluate accordingly.

Teachers were particularly trepidatious as they’ve been so conditioned to expect test scores to be a reflection on them. We overhauled and continue to iterate our evaluation system to factor in a range of new metrics and indicators that show successful efforts to teach the whole child. We regularly remind our teachers that we believe they are far more capable than teaching to a test, and we encourage them to have fun and find creative ways to teach a student to be successful in life.

### ***Win Over the Skeptics: Make the Conversation Personal***

A critical mass of partners in your plan is what you need to begin. But the effort to win more hearts and minds and maintain the trust of those you have doesn’t stop. There will be those who cling tightly to concern over test scores. There will be those whose faith you once had, but begin to question you. We have found that where generalized conversations fail, personal ones can prevail. Every reasonable adult knows that a test score says very little about a person’s talents and capabilities. Ask the doubters to consider their own children, or a niece, nephew, or any child they know personally. We have yet to meet a person who wants to believe and actually does believe any young person they know can be accurately summed up in a standardized test score. This suggestion, when put in personal terms, begins to feel like what it is: insulting and unfair.

### ***Be Flexible: Embrace Trial and Error in the Effort to Find New Metrics***

If we're no longer focusing first and foremost on test scores to evaluate students and teachers, then what? This question is one of the most important—but also one of the most difficult. How do you measure a student's interpersonal skills? How do you put a number on their ability to think creatively?

One of the greatest challenges around teaching interpersonal and creative skills is that they are inherently difficult to quantify. Where we cannot quantify output, we've come up with ways to quantify input. Per state legislation, Texas schools are required to address nine areas of learning as part of a state goal for schools to put more emphasis on community and student engagement. Those nine areas are:

1. Fine Arts
2. Wellness and Physical Education
3. Community and Parental Involvement
4. The 21<sup>st</sup> Century Workforce Development Program
5. The Second Language Acquisition Program
6. The Digital Learning Environment
7. Dropout Prevention
8. Educational Programs for the Gifted and Talented
9. Compliance with Statutory Reporting Requirements

It was left to the districts to determine how to address and measure efforts in each of these areas. As a district, we collaborated with stakeholders at all levels to determine various categories of instruction and programming per each area and how to measure results and progress accordingly. The end result was three rubrics—one each for elementary, middle, and high school—that laid out evaluation criteria (see the appendix for a sampling of HISD rubrics).

As an example of monitoring programming efficacy in area No. 4, 21<sup>st</sup> Century Workforce Development, at the elementary level, we track and measure the number of career exploration and career awareness activities or events that occur per school year. At middle and high school levels, we monitor student login, use, and activity in a college- and career-planning software tool called *Bridges*.

The specifics and details of how we've built a whole-child approach to instruction and learning that deemphasizes the test, and how we monitor program efficacy and progress are many. What is most important here is emphasizing what a collaborative and iterative process it was. We delegated heavily, invited ideas and insights from our board, district, and community members. We crafted a plan, tested out multiple ideas, and were willing to throw out ideas that didn't work and adapt those that did as needed.

As you set out with your own experimentation, prepare for a relatively common criticism: How can progress truly be measured if you're looking primarily at inputs? We have to concede the limits of looking at inputs, and we continue to look for ways to measure results whenever and wherever possible.

But we also accept—and communicate—that there are characteristics of a person that simply cannot be quantified. Thus, honest messaging on this topic is critical. It is not possible to measure what one student gets out of an art class. What we care about is that each student gets

*exposure* to the arts. Not every student will be the next Picasso, and the reasonable person knows this. But that's not the goal anyhow. The goal is to show students from a young age what creative thinking and its process looks like so that each student can exercise that part of his or her brain and then apply it to where his or her natural talents lie, be that science, business, a technical vocation, etc.

We are always reminding our principals, teachers, students, and parents that the goal is not for every last student to excel in each of these nine areas. That's unrealistic. The goal is exposure and fostering the well-rounded child who can connect a dot from each of these areas to create new thoughts and ideas.

### ***During Test Time, Stay Calm***

Around testing time, we sometimes see a district- and community-wide rush of anxiety. Pressure is contagious. As leaders, we see it as our job to model a calm demeanor around this time and tighten our resolve in keeping testing in perspective. If we sense panic, we go into messaging overdrive to remind our teachers and students that we're evaluating them much more than a test. And, more importantly, we reiterate our belief that everyone—teachers and students alike—is so much more dynamic, interesting, intelligent, and capable than what bubbles on a paper might otherwise attempt to suggest.

### ***Know and Accept that There Will be Challenges***

Keep in mind the magnitude and reality of what we're setting out to do: We're creating a new paradigm of instruction and learning. We're not innovating within the confines of the testing system; we're breaking out of it and building something new. Such dramatic change naturally elicits fear in many. It's our job as leaders not to criticize people for being human. Rather, we must acknowledge and respect people's fears, and then rationally, but passionately, explain why such change is needed. Accept that for this effort to tip—in your classroom, school, district, state and country—laser focus, deliberate effort, and enormous patience must precede it.

## **Start the Conversation in Your Schools**

We can talk all we want about the certain demise of the state test. But we can't move on from it until we have a plan to replace it. It's time to start small while thinking big, just as Dr. Sconzo and HISD have done so skillfully.

Start with a conversation. Commit to doing what's necessary to teach students to be successful in life, not just a test. Seize the opportunity to model for students the important skills they will need as high-functioning, productive adults in the multi-dimensional real world as they work through a complicated situations and forge new paths: patience and grit. Resolve to prepare your students for *their* future, not *our* past.

## References

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## APPENDIX

### **SAMPLE: Humble Independent School District 2015-2016 Elementary Community and Student Engagement Scorecard**

<b>21st Century Workforce Development</b>						
<b>Elementary</b>						
<b>Performance Measures</b>	<b>Unacceptable</b>	<b>Acceptable</b>	<b>Recognized</b>	<b>Exemplary</b>	<b>Data Source</b>	<b>Who will collect this data? (District or Campus?)</b>
Number of College and Career Enrichment Events Provided on the Campus (i.e., Guest Speakers, College Days, Career Days, Junior Achievement, etc.)	Zero events college and career enrichment events offered in one academic year	One college and career enrichment event in one academic year	Two college and career enrichment events in one academic year	A combination of three or more college and career enrichment events in one academic year	School Response Survey; Campus Calendar; Email Blasts to Parents	Principal Attestation
Number of Student-Centered College and Career Exploration Activities Provided on the Campus (i.e., Biztown, Math Olympians, Ecobots, Community Gardens, Video Announcements, Science Fair, Science Labs, etc.)	Zero student-centered college and career exploration activities offered in one academic year	One student-centered college and career exploration activity in one academic year	Two student-centered college and career exploration activities in one academic year	A combination of three or more student-centered college and career exploration activities in one academic year	School Response Survey; Campus Calendar; Email Blasts to Parents  NOTE: Cannot include same activities counted in G/T section.	Principal Attestation