

Dear School Board Members,

I'd like to begin by saying that I feel that it is a privilege to work in Highland Park. I feel tremendous support from the group of teachers I have the pleasure to work with and the parents of my students in the community. That being said, I have some academic concerns with the direction we have been and are going in as a district. I'm asking you to consider these points as strong evidence for not renewing this curriculum in the future.

I would like to share the details of my experiences with two programs being implemented that are negatively impacting student learning and teachers' morale. My main concern is the district adopted a program by Lucy Calkins. The content does not reflect the rigor, nor the depth, of the Texas TEKS that we are required to teach and assess. There are tremendous gaps in the content that our district and state mandates. Specifically, it lacks in areas pertaining to phonics, vocabulary and comprehension.

Second, the program is scripted, it does not feel organic or natural to teach in this manner. This expectation takes the joy out of teaching. There is also an uneasy sense of indoctrination that is taking place in the school system. As teachers, we are expected to accept a set of beliefs uncritically, and we are deemed as being difficult when we start to question the validity of Lucy Calkins methods and practices. For example, when using Lucy Calkins exclusively, I have seen the scores drop in reading and writing. The Lucy Calkins writing samples exhibited in her books, used as model papers, are far below our students' capabilities. When I started using Lucy Calkins writing lessons, my students' papers and scores dropped dramatically. As reflected in her scripted teaching style, my students' papers also became scripted. For example, the students would use the same Lucy language coined terms as introductions, and their writing lacked vision and voice. When I brought this to my administrator's attention, I was told to "trust the process." But, I do not trust the process, especially when I see the negative impact it is having on my students' writing scores.

In terms of the Lucy Calkins reading program, students are to choose books and we are to use the same scripted language to ask questions during the reading conferences regarding their independent reading selection. Without reading all of the books the students are independently reading, it is difficult to know if they are really understanding the content. In terms of reading using the Lucy Calkins method, it is more about synthesizing and analyzing information, and it is missing key components vital to student learning. In terms of assessing, there is a lack of accountability and real understanding. So needless to say, no I do not trust the system. Especially since I am aware that our reading scores as a district are dropping.

I also find it equally concerning that we are not supposed to talk about what is working and what is not working, and why this might be? Rather, we are supposed to adhere to a program that does not support growth in reading and writing for our Highland Park students. It has also been told to teachers by an administrator, that if parents should ask about Lucy Calkins that we are to say we just use it as a resource, however that is not the case. It has been a forced curriculum and we have been told to follow it accordingly and not to deviate from it.

On top of all of this, in addition to Lucy Calkins, teachers have been asked to start a new program called Break Out Sessions or Flex Groups. However, in reality, we are ability grouping. We were corrected by our administrator on what to say to parents. We are not to say we are ability grouping, which I find perplexing because we, with the administrator, looked at students' math and reading scores to determine whether or not to put them in the low, medium or high groups. This is yet again, another program that does not reflect the needs of our Highland Park population. Majority of our students are on grade level or above. Additionally, research has shown the negative effects ability grouping has on students socially and emotionally. Research has also shown more benefits by grouping elementary aged students by varying abilities. For example, grouping high and medium students together or medium and low students together. But as indicated above with Lucy Calkins program, what is equally concerning is that we are not being transparent and calling what we are doing by what it is, which is ability grouping.

At the beginning of the year, were introduced to the breakout sessions expectations with a slide show outlining one thing after the next of what we cannot do. For example, we cannot teach directly, have the students work on projects, or do anything portrayed as being fun. There were more examples of what not to do, however there were no examples of what we can do. When we asked "What exactly can we do?" Our instructional coach did not have an answer, nor were we provided with any additional resources or materials. An additional concern on top of the ones already outlined, in order for us to adhere to these Flex Groups, I do not have the time to teach the district mandated curriculum.

Teachers have been scorned and ridiculed for asking fundamental questions about these two programs that the district has adopted and we are being ordered to mislead parents about each of these programs and the impact it has on their children. I have also witnessed on several occasions veteran teachers crying and stressed out to the point of exhaustion and anger. It has not been a pleasant work environment. My efforts to address these concerns on a campus level with my administrator is not being acknowledged and has been dismissed because it has been reported to me that these decisions are coming from the district level by Lisa Wilson and Dr. Trigg. My strong recommendation is that these programs be phased out as quickly as possible. Please consider this information as input to getting back on track with educational programs that reflect the educational needs that our HPISD students deserve.

Thank you for your careful consideration.

An HPISD teacher