

Dear Parents,

Thank you so much for helping us with the Heinemann Units of Study problem. It has all but destroyed ELA instruction in HPISD, and our precious kids are suffering as a result. Teachers are not in a position to do anything about this issue; many of us have been called into principals' offices and told in no uncertain terms that we will use the Units of Study resources or face disciplinary action. As a result, we must have the help of our students' parents. You all are the only one who can remedy this terrible situation, and your kids need you to fight for them.

The most egregious flaw in the Units of Study program is that there is absolutely no academic substance to it whatsoever. It is completely scripted, and there is no experience or expertise needed at all to use it in the classroom. You could hand a Units of Study manual to virtually anyone, and they could easily go through the motions as written. All you have to do is follow the script. The work is very shallow and low-level, except when it is overtly pushing a certain political agenda, and then the activities and videos seem to magically increase.

Units of Study relies on a "workshop model" wherein teachers are strongly admonished NEVER to talk to the class for longer than 15 minutes. In fact, teachers are told to set a timer if they are incapable of following the 15-minute rule. After 15 minutes, and for the rest of the class period, students read silently in the self-selected novels, share orally in their groups, and respond to various, generalized questions by writing in their ELA journals. That's it. That's all there is to it. No grammar lessons, no focused literary analysis, no vocabulary study, and no real writing instruction. Every so often, specific essays (as prescribed by Units of Study) are assigned, but they are devoid of any real rigor or challenge. Traditional quizzes and tests are strongly discouraged. Teachers are told to be "facilitators" only. We are NOT to use direct teaching as our primary method of instruction, because this supposedly stifles kids' creativity and diminishes their love of learning. Teachers are merely "guides." We can move around the room and join in their group discussions, but that's about it.

Because of this, the teaching of whole-class novels has been strictly prohibited. Wonderful works of literature like *To Kill a Mockingbird*, *The Outsiders*, *The Old Man and the Sea*, *Murder on the Orient Express*, *The Giver*, *Number the Stars*, etc. are basically outlawed. The only way students would ever learn about these masterpieces is if they themselves just happened to choose them. Even then, they would be left to discover the literary elements and the important themes all on their own. Teachers are just supposed to present the skills; students search for the deeper meaning by themselves or with other students. The obvious problem with this is that when everyone is reading a different book, there is no way for the teacher to have read all those same books, and thus no way to know if what a student has "discovered" is even correct. Kids at this age do not have the skills necessary to delve deeply into a complex work and fully comprehend everything the book has to teach them. We have asked Kim Brooks and Lisa Wilson about this, and in response we were told "We teach the skills, not the books," whatever that means. Teachers have always used whole-class novels to teach writing, critical thinking, and literary analysis; at no time did we simply "teach the books."

Another extremely alarming aspect of Units of Study is that its main purpose is clearly indoctrination, not ELA instruction. A liberal, leftist political agenda is presented as the only reasonable way of looking

at the world, and our young, impressionable students are led to believe that this is how they ought to think, too, if they want to be responsible, compassionate citizens. This is unconscionable. Moral values, political views and religious beliefs should be taught by the parents at home, not by teachers in a public school. Our job as educators is to remain neutral and inclusive and to respect the diverse backgrounds of our students. We are there to teach our academic subjects to the best of our ability, not to spread divisive propaganda. Heinemann's resources make that impossible. The lessons are slanted and deliberately worded so as to promote only one worldview.

In addition, many of the books that Heinemann sends to schools for use in their classrooms are nothing short of appalling. These books were purchased with district funds and shipped to teachers in conjunction with Units of Study materials. A lot of them deal with (and in some cases, even promote) Critical Race Theory, transgenderism, LGBTQ advocacy, the occult, teenage sex, self abuse, suicide, etc. The rationale and justification given for these books? Students need to read as many books as possible, as quickly as possible, in order to improve their overall reading skills. Therefore, the novels we offer must be "edgy" and "real" and "push the limits" in order to grab and keep an adolescent's attention. This is horrifying! Units of Study directs teachers to use these books as mentor texts and in our mini-lessons. The fact that Heinemann Publishing would even think that novels such as these are appropriate tells us all we need to know about that company. Heinemann has promoted itself to school districts as something it is not, and it has done so at the expense of your children.

Many of us spoke up soon after these resources were adopted, but we were quickly put in our places. Consequently, as a second line of defense, most campuses now pay "instructional coaches" to spy on teachers and report back to administrators under the guise of helping us. Most of the time these coaches have zero background in ELAR and/or the grade levels to which they are assigned. Their job is to look at our lessons, show us how to water them down, and make sure they (and we) conform to Heinemann standards.

I am heartbroken over what has happened to ELAR instruction in our district. Highland Park has always had a reputation for academic excellence. As kids have matriculated through HPISD, they and their parents were always assured of a top-notch education that prepared students for the best colleges and universities in the world, and for whatever endeavors students chose to pursue. As things stand now, we as a district are failing them. We are NOT increasing their literacy or improving their writing skills. Their grammar knowledge has remained stagnant. They have gotten better at picking out independent reading books, perhaps, but we always had them do that as part of our program anyway. While the pandemic may have made things somewhat worse for a little while, we must remember that HPISD has been using Units of Study for several years now. This is the primary cause of the deterioration in skills.

Please do not hold back when you speak to the school board. Please encourage other parents to speak up as well. That is the only way things will change. I do understand there are some teachers and administrators out there who sing the praises of this horrendous program, but I promise you, most of them feel obligated to do so. We are not at liberty to express our concerns or to use our many years of teaching experience to educate your children. I love my subject, and I love my job. Most of all, I love the kids. We all love them, and we want what's best for them. Heinemann's Units of Study is completely

unsuitable for a district like Highland Park. It is a divisive, unhealthy, counterproductive resource that has no real educational value. We can and must do better.

[FROM AN HPISD TEACHER]