

Empowers Families  
Unites Communities  
Builds Capacity

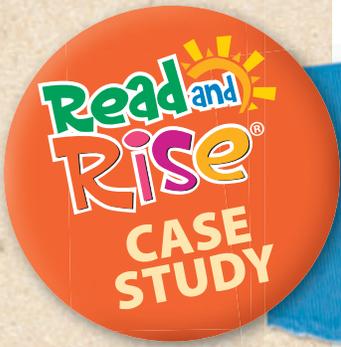
An Inspiring  
Partnership Yields  
Literacy Results



CASE STUDY:  
National Urban League's  
Houston affiliate and  
the Houston Independent  
School District

# Read and Rise Cultivates Literacy





## An Inspiring Partnership Yields Literacy Results

The National Urban League's Houston affiliate partnered with Houston Independent School District (HISD) to introduce Scholastic's Read and Rise, focusing specifically on how to engage and empower families as an essential part of their children's literacy and their lifelong success.

What they've achieved over the last few years is both a story of inspiration in how community leaders, educational leaders and educators can partner to maximize families' participation in their children's education and a valuable source of best practices for effective program implementation.

Representatives from HISD's 2009 inductees into the Partnership Hall of Fame.



One of the dynamic events, which brought Read & Rise to the attention of hundreds of parents, educators and community stakeholders.



### Key Accomplishments of this Strategic Vision and Leadership

Over the last nine years the Houston Independent School District (HISD) has had ongoing successes in the implementation of Read and Rise.

During this period:

- Twelve elementary schools targeted by Houston Area Urban League (HAUL) have had their status changed by the Texas Education Agency (TEA). **Five have moved to recognized status and seven to exemplary status.**
- HISD recognized HAUL for this accomplishment in 2009 by inducting the agency into their Partnership Hall of Fame.

## Leaders United For Literacy Gains: HISD, HAUL and Scholastic

Similar to many school districts across the country, HISD has grappled with the interlinked problems of underperforming schools and families living in poverty. As part of his role as Director of Education & Youth Development for the Houston Area Urban League, John Robinson had for some time been looking for a means to effectively engage all stakeholders in changing reading and literacy outcomes.

Attending the Whitney M. Young training in New Orleans on behalf of HAUL, John was struck by both the knowledge and enthusiasm of Dr. Suzanne Carothers, Professor, New York University and a lead author of Read and Rise as well as by the well-researched and complete strategy underpinning the whole program. This was the banner statement he'd been looking for; an approach he felt could really make a difference. In John's words, "this was a comprehensive and connected strategy that allied educators and community groups—a powerful and adaptable platform that would get results." Intrigued and inspired, John set about seeing how HAUL could bring the program to HISD.

## Why Read and Rise Makes Strategic and Educational Sense

HAUL quickly saw that Read and Rise's unique advantage was in how it linked together, informed and involved all partners in children's education. The combined and coordinated impact was definitely so much greater than any stakeholder acting independently.

### Read and Rise seeks to:

- Connect and build capacity among families, educators and leaders, emphasizing the unique role of each in a child's life.
- Strengthen and support existing community goals, resources and infrastructures.
- Provide effective and relevant programming, materials and messages.
- Validate family traditions and local culture as central to literacy development.
- Unite the community around reading and literacy.

## The Challenges:

Almost 1 million adults in Houston are functionally illiterate

Houston ranks 37 of the US's 63 largest cities in terms of functional literacy

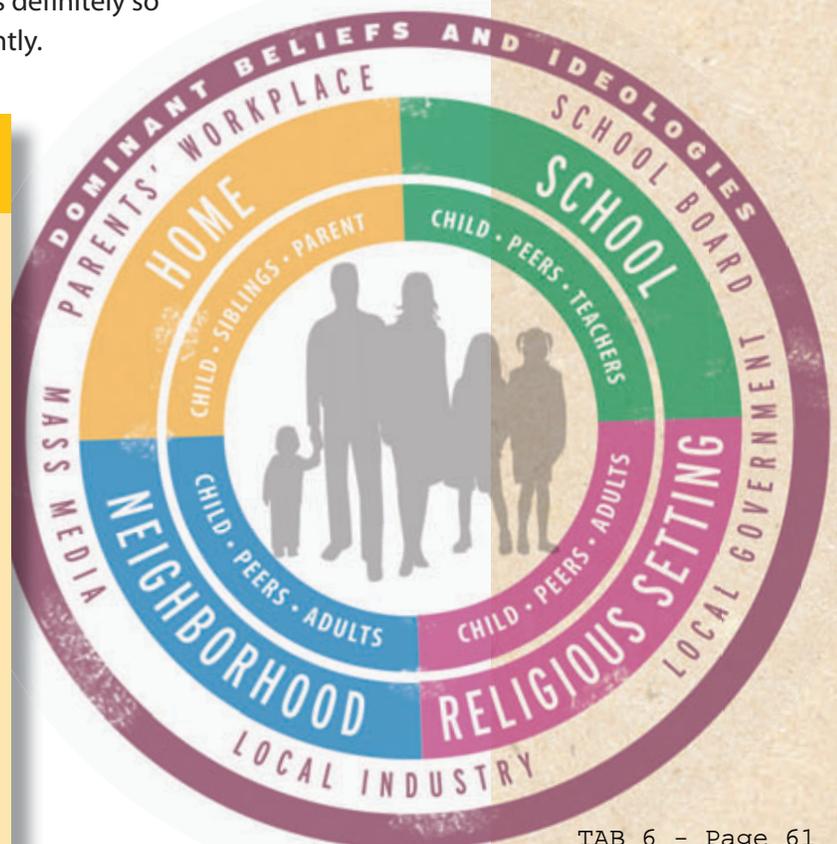
Largest school district in Texas

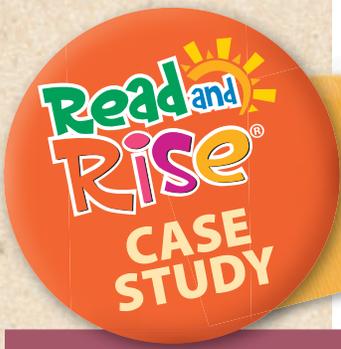
52% of adults in Harris County, where HISD is located, are functionally illiterate

Lowest property tax revenues of any district in Harris County

### Changing demographics:

- 62.4% Hispanic
- 25.1% African American
- 8.1% white
- 3.3% Asian





## Engage Families

### 10 Top Tips for Getting Families Involved

- 1** **Raise awareness of the event**—be creative in generating publicity to create a buzz.
- 2** **Make it “A Night Out” with food and door prizes**—a family affair that will be remembered.
- 3** **Feature traditions and recognize culture**—engage the audience in personal recollections
- 4** **Invite all generations of family** and anchor literacy message in the context of family.
- 5** **Make it interactive and engaging**—use validating language and circulate through the crowd, making sure they know you appreciate them being there!
- 6** Explore how to **incorporate literacy messages into everyday activities** like shopping, cooking and being in the community.
- 7** **Highlight that literacy is fun**—use board games and make read alouds engaging!
- 8** Show that **reading together can build bonds** and memories.
- 9** Stress how important **literacy skills are to success in today’s changing world**. Provide local statistics on reading levels and job opportunities.
- 10** Remind families (again and again) that **they are crucial literacy partners** and are needed not just at home but in school and the community!

### Families: Essential Partners for Literacy—In and Out of School

Focusing on family engagement, HAUL realized early on that families would need to not just know about the various elements of Read and Rise but to have a chance to experience the program for themselves. Families needed to feel ownership and realize that the program was *theirs*, and that they were vital to its implementation and success.

Through their own experience and through the resources of Read and Rise, HAUL was keenly aware that family involvement was indispensable for getting children off to an early start, and that family involvement (or lack thereof) could have long-term cascading effects for either good or bad. Like all top-notch event planners John engaged his audience, connecting through reference to cultural and local traditions—making sure to “entertain a bit while educating”. He was careful not to fall into the trap of lecturing to families and telling them what they should and shouldn’t do—also core to the Read and Rise methodology.

So, right from the start, he encouraged interactivity and open dialogue. He started offering the program by first hosting a large “Read and Rise Family Night Out” to entice families with some of the program’s key messages around their role in their children’s literacy development. The evening was split between larger discussions and breakout sessions. Those reporting back from the breakouts could use whatever method they chose to communicate their findings—including singing and the sharing of vivid, personal recollections and observations. As part of this kick off large event, he then registers families to participate in the full Read and Rise workshop series, allowing for a more personalized and in-depth support.

## Strategically Engaging Partners For a Lasting Legacy Of Literacy

Alongside Scholastic's partnership, resources and materials, actively communicating, engaging and constantly updating a varied range of strategic local and national partners, helped ensure the multi-year success of Read and Rise in HISD.

### Awareness

The conversations about funding really picked up momentum in early 2006. First, parents and guardians attending the sessions gained confidence in their abilities to draw on what they already knew from their own upbringing as a means to support their children's literacy development. Then, the schools began to notice a change in students' willingness to participate in the classroom as well as an improvement in their behaviors. Next, principals begin to share information about the conversations with their peers, area preachers and other community partners. Soon, corporate representatives, school board members, and local leaders begin dropping in to see what was happening at the much-talked-about Read and Rise Family Conversations. As a result, school leadership teams started including the Read and Rise Family Conversations in their proposals for funding parent involvement. Subsequently, the buzz about the conversations kept growing. HISD had been struggling to find quality parental development programs and Read and Rise provided a solution.

### Engagement and Funding

HAUL began to think about corporate sponsors that would be willing to help them with their promotion. The message was simple: it made more sense to invest in "Prevention" rather than "Intervention." HAUL launched their campaign to use Read and Rise as the main platform that would help parents understand their role as their child's first teachers. They emphasized how the cascading effects on children's futures were linked to early literacy. Houston/Galveston Area Council, who continues to fund the program to this day, decided to get involved. Then, HEB, a large grocery chain in Texas, came on board.

### Continued Outreach

In 2009, HAUL began incorporating Read and Rise into the services to their fifteen strategically selected consortia of churches around Houston. With the help of WAL\*MART, they began video streaming *Read and Rise Family Conversations* to parents, guardians, church and community leaders. Today they have a network of 20 churches and 32 early childcare centers receiving a video stream of the program.

## Recruit Community Partners

The network of funders keeps growing as the scope of HISD's Read and Rise implementation continues to expand.

#### National Urban League + Federal Department of Education

Ongoing funders from early on to the present.

#### Nation Urban League + UPS

Became funders in the second and third years of the program.

#### Houston Astros, Houston Texans, Houston Rockets

Top local sports franchises saw program funding as key to giving back to their communities.

#### United Way, Greater Houston

Decided to get involved because of the program's proven track record.

#### State Farm

A valued funder for the program's overall implementation.

#### The Lilly Foundation

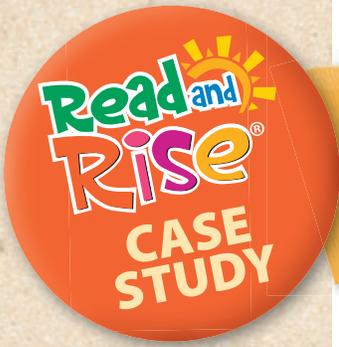
Provided a grant used to develop a best practices module.

#### WAL\*Mart

Impressed by examples of the program's success and provided funding.

#### HEB Grocery Stores

Funding for overall implementation as well as door prizes.



Go Team!

## **Educators and Coaches: Key Members of the Learning “Team”**

When implementing Read and Rise in HISD, HAUL made sure to emphasize how the program would make teacher’s jobs easier and more rewarding through help, encouragement and participation from families and other partners within the educational system.

HAUL worked to connect parents, educators and the community to work as allies to guarantee childrens' future literacy success.

Educators saw how parents could become their allies in education and realized how through Read and Rise parents could gain a new appreciation of teachers’ central function in children’s future success. John Robinson believes school district coaches can also be very important to the success of Read and Rise so he is currently undertaking to get as many coaches as possible involved. Because of their influence with the community and their ability to reach and motivate families,

coaches can help cure the literacy crisis in schools. Having coaches and athletes from the high school athletic programs spend even small amounts of time facilitating pieces of the Conversations would draw great numbers, encourage, motivate, and change the culture of literacy in the community. It would help parents realize that the same methods they use in training their children early for athletics can also lead to educational achievement—and a lifetime of success.

## **Getting (and Keeping) Educational Leaders Involved**

HAUL didn’t take the support of superintendents, principals and other stakeholders for granted. Crucial to them was the involvement of PTO’s to continually reach out to and connect with parents.

First, they informed all stakeholders of the events, and next sent constant reminders of the program’s success, through follow-up letters—with photographs conveying the events’ size and vibrant atmosphere. Then, they made sure everybody was engaged and excited about the program’s outcomes and its possibilities for expansion and future success. In time, they noticed how stakeholders in other districts were seeking to know more about the program and investigating taking part. Finally, they made certain to build constant visibility and to keep that awareness alive.

## Community Involvement at the Heart of Sustaining Literacy Success

The stories of the program’s success were shared through local media on an ongoing basis. Local politicians and leading figures were invited to attend and participate at events, reinforcing the message that a combined network of influence and support would be crucial for long-term success.

This strategy showed results relatively quickly. The story of Read and Rise grew so that by 2009, other community based agencies, churches, and local businesses had invited the Conversations into their initiatives. The problem was that there was only one person available to facilitate the sessions. Time constraints meant John Robinson could not conduct them all. Consequently, in 2008 John began to train members of the school PTO as trainers to facilitate Conversations at their schools. This ensured there would always be trainers available to provide sessions on an ongoing basis. Furthermore, it meant that the word about the Read and Rise Family Conversations would continue to spread on a sustainable basis.

### Conclusion: The Program’s Outcomes

The implementation of *Read and Rise* in HISD has had a number of measurable outcomes. The program has raised awareness of the importance of early literacy to future success. What’s more, it has provided demonstrable literacy, participation and graduation results. In addition, the initiative shows solid and steady signs of growth and evolution. Furthermore, *Read and Rise* has proved to be an organic and adaptable platform for both short term and long-term sustainable change. These tables summarize some facts and figures demonstrating the extent of these developments and outcomes.

Outcomes
Graduation rate in HISD is at an all-time district high—for 2010 an improvement of 4.3% on the previous year
Dropout rate in HISD is at an all-time district low—12.6%—a 3.2% decline from 2009
3 HISD schools featured on <i>Newsweek’s</i> 2011 List of “America’s Best High Schools
25 HISD schools on <i>The Washington Post’s</i> 2011 Challenge Index (a measure of academic rigor)—up from 16 in 2009

Scope of Implementation
300-500 people in auditoriums—completely overturning the conventional wisdom “you can’t get parents to come out”
Induction into the HISD 2009 Partnership Hall of Fame
Worked with and engaged more than 25,000 parents
12 elementary schools in this period changed to recognized (5) or exemplary status (7)
120,000 books distributed
70,200 magazines distributed
25,000 Parent Read and Rise guides distributed
89% of 500 parent/caregivers surveyed in schools said their weekly family hour now consists of reading books for fun!



Planning and implementation  
worksheet available at  
[scholastic.com/FACE](http://scholastic.com/FACE)

## Family & Community Engagement Checklist

- Define** your goals around literacy development.
- Identify** your team and your audience.
- Research** the best ways to implement the program in your district or community.
- Promote** your kick-off event and workshops.
- Build capacity** by implementing a sustainable Read and Rise model that best suits your needs.
- Track and measure** program performance.

