

Leverage Leadership: A Dramatic Expansion of Benchmark Testing

Leverage Leadership (LL), a Harvard EdLab initiative, began as a pilot in 29 HISD schools in August 2014. The administration plans to expand it to 140 schools by the spring of 2015. This program is deeply flawed, from concept to execution, and poses a grave danger to the health of the district.

The HISD school board should halt this program after Year 1 and require a third party evaluation before it is continued or expanded.

Leverage Leadership mandates a dramatic expansion of benchmark testing.

- Students take four district-based assessments in the first 13 weeks of school with four more scheduled for the spring.
- These tests are district-created with minimal teacher input and vetted by Harvard EdLabs. They often cover content not yet taught and differ substantively from the original teacher version.
- Administrators are required to observe teachers (20 min/wk) and discuss data (30 min/wk) with each teacher. For a 15 teacher load, this translates to 2.3 hrs/day. This is more than 25% of a workday and is not inclusive of evaluation.

LL is demoralizing students.

- Children do not see connections between their instruction and their assessments.
- Many schools assign students test grades for snapshots.
- Students are discouraged by assessments that test them over content they have not yet learned.
- The snapshots derail instruction the week prior to the snapshot as teachers only receive snapshots one week ahead of district-mandated testing windows.
- Students from *pre-K* through high school are taking benchmarks.

Leverage Leadership damages our schools.

- Requiring administrators to spend 25% of their day on LL activities means less time for creating and monitoring a safe school environment, facilities management, and building relationships with students, faculty, staff and community.
- This program is modeled after EdLab's Apollo program, which saw no significant change in ELA scores, no sustained math gains, a precipitous drop in student enrollment and massive teacher turnover.

LL is a dangerous diversion of time, energy, and resources from meaningful instruction and evaluation.

- HISD will pay \$1.25 million over two years for LL assessments and coaching.
- Benchmarking reduces instructional time.
- Data is not useful to assess student learning because benchmarks do not test what was taught.
- As a result, teachers either create their own tests that are in line with what students are learning or forego them to preserve instructional time.
- Teachers report that the tests are poorly written.
- The test prep focus of this program does not produce college and career ready adults.
- These assessments compel teachers to sacrifice best practices in favor of test prep.

LL may be violating state law.

- HB5 permits districts to give **only two benchmark tests per year per subject.** (The state defines benchmarks as district-required assessments designed to prepare students for state assessments.)
- Be they called snapshots or interim assessments or benchmarks, the HISD LL benchmarks are clearly in violation of the intent of HB5.
- In addition, LL contradicts the intent of the unanimously approved 2012 HISD Board Resolution Against Over-Testing.

Recommendations

- Give schools and teachers the flexibility to administer benchmarks after students have been taught the associated content.
- Give schools and teachers the flexibility to write their own tests in lieu of district-based snapshots. This provides opportunities for more meaningful data-driven instruction.
- Halt Leverage Leadership and require a third party evaluation before it is continued or expanded.