

2014 TERREL H. BELL RECIPIENT

Melissa Helene Jacobs-Thibaut, Principal

Houston Academy for International Studies

713-942-1430

mjacobs1@houstonisd.org

Houston, Texas

Houston Independent School District

Superintendent Dr. Terry Grier

tgrier@houstonisd.org

Most principals assume their positions knowing they have seasoned teachers and a support staff to smooth the transition. Melissa Helene Jacobs-Thibaut did not. She was a first-time principal when she began the Houston Academy for International Studies (HAIS) in some trailers in the parking lot of a local college campus. A Peace Corps graduate with a vision of equity and inclusion, she and her team created a rigorous college preparatory high school for first-in-the-family college goers. Her aim was to prepare high school graduates with two years of college credit, career internships, and international travel experience.

HAIS students are recruited through open admission with a required interview. They arrive from all over Houston, and nearly three-quarters qualify for subsidized meals and 40% are considered at risk of not graduating high school. Almost all of HAIS's 400 students are African American or Hispanic. Four years after the school's founding in 2006, 95% of its first graduating class went on to four-year colleges, many with Associate's degrees.

As an Early College high school (designated in 2008), the HAIS curriculum includes Pre- AP, AP, and Houston Community College (HCC) courses (on campus and among college students). College credits count toward high school graduation and are transferable to any state university. Students may also earn an Associate's Degree while in high school through a partnership with HCC. The internationally focused curriculum includes Global Business, AP Human Geography, and AP World History. Students take four years of a foreign language (Mandarin is an option) and create annual portfolio projects with a global perspective. Seniors participate in Friday internships with Houston professionals such as engineers, doctors, journalists, energy industry personnel, and teachers. They also complete capstone projects in which they identify a community problem and create a project to address it, complete with video presentations to the community showcasing their project.

Teachers take advantage of Houston's museums, colleges, and cultural monuments to enrich students' learning. Students also take part in Model United Nations expositions around the country. HAIS also has a tradition of yearly trips, such as a three-day camp for freshmen where they kayak, climb ropes, and ride horses, some for the first time. HAIS staff seek scholarships for summer and full-year study abroad, and students have traveled with programs to China, Israel, Turkey, Thailand, Malaysia, Brazil and South Africa, Cambodia, Turkey, South Korea, and Malaysia.

The entire faculty meets weekly for professional development and annually for team-building. Teachers participate in two PLCs, one in their subject area and the other in their grade level. Subject-area PLCs teachers create standards-based bi-weekly assessments and regularly review data in terms of best instructional practices. Grade-level PLCs work across subject areas to review students' academic acceleration and intervention plans and discuss their affective needs. They also design out-of-school learning experiences and cross-curricular projects. Both PLCs practice protocol-driven instructional rounds where they observe each other as well as teachers from other schools. A team of teacher leaders implemented the school's 1-1 computer initiative and are pioneering the use of tablets in the classroom.

To meet students' academic needs, school leaders established a longer school day with time for interventions, after school tutorials, and Saturday school. They established a daily Advocacy class to create a sense of "family" and a safe space, and every student has a caring adult advocate. Students are encouraged to exercise their voices. In addition to choosing the school mascot and colors, they design and lead school clubs and advocacy classes, conduct school announcements, instruct teachers in technology, and create their own college schedules and Senior Internship plans.

Melissa Helene Jacobs-Thibaut: [Houston Academy for International Studies](http://HoustonAcademyforInternationalStudies.org), Houston, TX