

***U.S. Department of Education***  
***2020 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program***

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[X] Public or [ ] Non-public

For Public Schools only: (Check all that apply) [ ] Title I [ ] Charter [ ] Magnet [ ] Choice

Name of Principal Mr. Richard Bartz  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

Official School Name Houston Elementary School  
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 310 S Sherman  
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Houston State MN Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 55943-8653

County Houston

Telephone (507) 896-5323 Fax (507) 896-3222

Web site/URL https://www.houston.k12.mn.us/page/2945 E-mail krin.abraham@hps294.us

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Principal's Signature) Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name of Superintendent\* Ms. Krin Abraham E-mail krin.abraham@hps294.us  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name Houston Public School District Tel. (507) 896-5323

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Superintendent's Signature) Date \_\_\_\_\_

Name of School Board  
President/Chairperson Mr. Tom Stilin  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(School Board President's/Chairperson's Signature) Date \_\_\_\_\_

The original signed cover sheet only should be converted to a PDF file and uploaded via the online portal.

*\*Non-public Schools: If the information requested is not applicable, write N/A in the space.*

## **PART I – ELIGIBILITY CERTIFICATION**

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The signatures on the first page of this application (cover page) certify that each of the statements below, concerning the school’s eligibility and compliance with U.S. Department of Education and National Blue Ribbon Schools requirements, are true and correct.

1. All nominated public schools must meet the state’s performance targets in reading (or English language arts) and mathematics and other academic indicators (i.e., attendance rate and graduation rate), for the all students group, including having participation rates of at least 95 percent using the most recent accountability results available for nomination.
2. To meet final eligibility, all nominated public schools must be certified by states prior to September 2020 in order to meet all eligibility requirements. Any status appeals must be resolved at least two weeks before the awards ceremony for the school to receive the award.
3. The school configuration includes one or more of grades K-12. Schools on the same campus with one principal, even a K-12 school, must apply as an entire school.
4. The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2014 and each tested grade must have been part of the school for the past three years.
5. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2015, 2016, 2017, 2018, or 2019.
6. The nominated school has no history of testing irregularities, nor have charges of irregularities been brought against the school at the time of nomination. If irregularities are later discovered and proven by the state, the U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school’s application and/or rescind a school’s award.
7. The nominated school has not been identified by the state as “persistently dangerous” within the last two years.
8. The nominated school or district is not refusing Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district-wide compliance review.
9. The OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the school district concluding that the nominated school or the district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan from the district to remedy the violation.
10. The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the nominated school or the school district, as a whole, has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution’s equal protection clause.
11. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the school or school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.

## PART II - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

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Data should be provided for the most recent school year (2019-2020) unless otherwise stated.

**DISTRICT** (Question 1 is not applicable to non-public schools)

1. Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
- 1 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
  - 0 Middle/Junior high schools
  - 2 High schools
  - 1 K-12 schools
- 4 TOTAL

**SCHOOL** (To be completed by all schools)

2. Category that best describes the area where the school is located. If unsure, refer to NCES database for correct category: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/> (Find your school and check “Locale”)

- Urban (city or town)  
 Suburban  
 Rural

3. Number of students as of October 1, 2019 enrolled at each grade level or its equivalent at the school:

Grade	# of Males	# of Females	Grade Total
<b>PreK</b>	24	27	51
<b>K</b>	13	10	23
<b>1</b>	11	16	27
<b>2</b>	13	17	30
<b>3</b>	12	17	29
<b>4</b>	15	12	27
<b>5</b>	17	16	33
<b>6</b>	15	21	36
<b>7</b>	0	0	0
<b>8</b>	0	0	0
<b>9</b>	0	0	0
<b>10</b>	0	0	0
<b>11</b>	0	0	0
<b>12 or higher</b>	0	0	0
<b>Total Students</b>	120	136	256

\*Schools that house PreK programs should count preschool students **only** if the school administration is responsible for the program.

4. Racial/ethnic composition of the school (if unknown, estimate):
- 0 % American Indian or Alaska Native
  - 0 % Asian
  - 1.6 % Black or African American
  - 1.3 % Hispanic or Latino
  - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - 95 % White
  - 2.1 % Two or more races
  - 100 % Total**

(Only these seven standard categories should be used to report the racial/ethnic composition of your school. The Final Guidance on Maintaining, Collecting, and Reporting Racial and Ethnic Data to the U.S. Department of Education published in the October 19, 2007 *Federal Register* provides definitions for each of the seven categories.)

5. Student turnover, or mobility rate, during the 2018 - 2019 school year: ≤1%

If the mobility rate is above 15%, please explain:

This rate should be calculated using the grid below. The answer to (6) is the mobility rate.

<b>Steps For Determining Mobility Rate</b>	<b>Answer</b>
(1) Number of students who transferred <i>to</i> the school after October 1, 2018 until the end of the 2018-2019 school year	0
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2018 until the end of the 2018-2019 school year	2
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	2
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2018	287
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	<.01
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	<1

6. Specify each non-English language represented in the school (separate languages by commas):

NA

English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 0 %  
0 Total number ELL

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 39 %

Total number students who qualify: 101

8. Students receiving special education services: 23 %

60 Total number of students served

Indicate below the number of students with disabilities according to conditions designated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Do not add additional conditions. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- |                                  |  |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>9</u> Autism                  | <u>1</u> Multiple Disabilities                 |
| <u>0</u> Deafness                | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment                 |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness          | <u>10</u> Other Health Impaired                |
| <u>12</u> Developmental Delay    | <u>11</u> Specific Learning Disability         |
| <u>3</u> Emotional Disturbance   | <u>25</u> Speech or Language Impairment        |
| <u>0</u> Hearing Impairment      | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury                |
| <u>0</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>0</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 24

10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to the nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below:

	<b>Number of Staff</b>
Administrators	1
Classroom teachers, including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	15
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	9
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	11
Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	1

11. Average student-classroom teacher ratio, that is, the number of students in the school divided by the FTE of classroom teachers, e.g., 22:1 17:1

12. Show daily student attendance rates. Only high schools need to supply yearly graduation rates.

<b>Required Information</b>	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016	2014-2015
Daily student attendance	97%	98%	97%	95%	93%
High school graduation rate	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

13. **For high schools only, that is, schools ending in grade 12 or higher.**

Show percentages to indicate the post-secondary status of students who graduated in Spring 2019.

<b>Post-Secondary Status</b>	
Graduating class size	0
Enrolled in a 4-year college or university	0%
Enrolled in a community college	0%
Enrolled in career/technical training program	0%
Found employment	0%
Joined the military or other public service	0%
Other	0%

14. Indicate whether your school has previously received a National Blue Ribbon Schools award.

Yes  No

If yes, select the year in which your school received the award.

15. In a couple of sentences, provide the school’s mission or vision statement.

Our school's mission is to discover, develop and achieve the potential within all learners in order to achieve our district vision of leading in learning.

16. **For public schools only**, if the school is a magnet, charter, or choice school, explain how students are chosen to attend.

## **PART III - SUMMARY**

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At first glance and looking at the data on paper, Houston Elementary School does not seem to be a likely candidate for Blue Ribbon status. The building, constructed in 1939, does not have smartboards in the classrooms or other amenities oftentimes considered vital to school success, and many of the students in those classrooms come from economically disadvantaged homes. In fact, two out of every five students qualify for free-or-reduced-price lunch and almost one out of every four receive special education services. However, looking at just those data points, one would not see what makes Houston Elementary School so special.

The building is old, but it is well maintained and has signs affixed to the front proudly proclaiming that Houston Elementary School obtained REWARD status, the highest ranking given by the Minnesota Department of Education, five of the six years the designation was awarded. The year that REWARD status was not reached, the school achieved Celebration status. The students, staff and community are proud of their school and the education that is offered within those walls. This pride is generational since many of the current parents were students in the building; in fact, many grandparents were also former Houston Elementary School students. Economically, the school might not be rich, but the wealth of support for students and staff from the community creates an environment that is rich with potential for the students. Collectively, the students, staff, parents and greater community work together to foster an environment in which every child can succeed.

The school offers educational stability and security to the community and its children. Led by a principal who has been at the helm for twenty-four years, the school staff knows that decisions will be made based on what is in the best interest of the students since that has been the guiding force throughout the principal's tenure. The staff and community know the principal's door is open and he follows the tenet that all voices should be heard and pertinent data gathered before decisions are made. This philosophy provides a comfortable environment for the teachers to explore new techniques and applications without the anxiety of being forced to implement an initiative that has not been tested or researched thoroughly. The staff has become a team that works for continuous improvement with an incremental approach without the stress of sweeping changes. This philosophy also provides comfort to the parents since they also know that changes are made using a proactive, problem-solving approach.

One change that set the course for the solid educational program offered by Houston Elementary School was the adoption of the Core Knowledge curriculum sequence. After the sixth-grade teachers, one of whom is the current elementary principal, served as early adopters of the curriculum starting in 1994, the whole school adopted the curriculum sequence in 1999. In 2005, the Core Knowledge Foundation recognized the school as an official Core Knowledge school; however, in 2012 due to the new financial requirements imposed by that foundation, the school let the official status lapse but continued to follow the curriculum sequence. Core Knowledge fits the vision of Houston Elementary School since the curriculum sequence is firmly rooted in developing cultural literacy and the foundational skills and abilities that are necessary for students to become contributing, positive members of society. This sequence serves as the backbone on which all other programs and initiatives are attached. The curriculum sequence provided an excellent foundation on which to build the social and emotional explicit instruction that was added to the curriculum in 2018 after a group of teachers had researched different models and selected the approach that best fit the school's philosophy and the students' needs.

The strong foundation that has been built at Houston Elementary School has been supported by the preschool program that has been administered by the school for decades. The majority of the students entering Kindergarten have been students at the preschool. In 1998, the preschool teacher joined forces with the early childhood special education teacher, believing that putting their programs together would create a stronger foundation for the students and foster tolerance and understanding among the students and their parents. Following the vision of the then-new principal, the teachers felt that mainstreaming the students while still providing for their individual needs would prepare students for the similar environment they would experience throughout elementary school. In this way, the students were not only being supported academically but also emotionally and psychologically. From the youngest students, the children at Houston

Elementary School know that each one of them is a vital, cherished and supported member of the school family. They are known by name, by need, and most importantly, by the potential that exists within each one of them. As the mission statement compels, the school seeks to discover, develop and achieve the potential within all learners.

## **PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION**

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### **1. Core Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.**

**1a.** Overall approach, which may include overarching philosophy or approaches common across subject areas

The curriculum at Houston Elementary School is firmly rooted in the Core Knowledge philosophy, which focuses on students achieving cultural literacy and becoming positive members of society. The Core Knowledge sequence provides the backbone and the topics that are instructed at each grade level and in each curricular area, but to create the strongest educational environment, several other philosophies are juxtaposed with the Core Knowledge sequence. Since Core Knowledge is constructed with the best practice of connecting new knowledge to prior knowledge, this philosophy is adhered to by every teacher in every class. Not only is prior knowledge activated with each new lesson, but the objective and purpose for the learning is also shared. The teachers have worked together to define the essential learner outcomes for each of the curricular areas and have shared those outcomes with the students. The students know each new concept learned is going to be applied not just in that class but in later classes and future years.

This brings up the next philosophy of continuous improvement. Since concepts and skills are spiraled through the curriculum, the students know they have multiple attempts to improve their concept acquisition and skill development. The students are freed to learn without the pressure of believing they will forever be behind if they do not master the topic the first time. This freedom allows them to practice higher order thinking skills without fear of failing.

The final philosophy is applying the value of teamwork and working within a team to help everyone improve. As the teachers work as a cohesive team to research and implement continuous improvement, they assist the students in following the same tenet as they help fellow classmates master new learning. In this way the students develop the skills to be conscientious, contributing members of society.

**1b.** Reading/English language arts

New English and language arts curriculum was purchased and implemented in the 2016-2017 school year; however, at the conclusion of that school year, the teachers did not see the positive bump in test scores and student skills that were purported by the curriculum's authors. Therefore, in the summer of 2017, the teachers at Houston Elementary School were trained in curriculum mapping and worked diligently throughout the summer to map their reading, spelling, grammar and composition curricula to ensure every Minnesota Academic Standard in English and Language Arts was not only addressed within their classrooms but was addressed in a spiraled manner that allowed the students multiple attempts at mastery throughout the school year. Understanding that each grade does not function as a silo, the teachers worked with the teachers of the grade levels immediately below and above the grade level they were mapping to ensure the spiral of knowledge being created within each grade also fit into the broader spiral of knowledge across grade levels. Following the data-driven decision-making philosophy of the school, this curriculum mapping was also informed by the test results that had been generated by students in the 2016-2017 school year. The teachers not only used the state accountability results but also used the progress monitoring fluency and comprehension scores and classroom assignment and test results generated by the new curriculum.

Using the Core Knowledge philosophy that knowledge builds on prior knowledge and the connections among topics being learned is key to mastery, the teachers mapped the strands within English and language arts so that the learning in one strand could support and build on the learning in another strand. Spelling was no longer seen as a stand-alone curriculum that was based on lists passed down through the years from one teacher to another, but instead spelling became a tool to preview the upcoming reading's vocabulary words that had been problematic for students the prior year. The composition assignments built on themes that had been illuminated during the classroom reading lessons and were crafted to allow the teacher to weave grammar, usage and mechanics instruction into the composition lessons so the students could apply what they were learning to real-world situations.

Most importantly, the curriculum mapping allowed the intervention teachers to have a concrete picture of and a timeline for the skills their students were being asked to display in their general education classrooms. The intervention teachers working with the struggling students could pre-teach some of the skills their students would need in upcoming assignments. The enrichment teacher could use the map to build on the skills the students already had, knowing what skills and abilities would be addressed in the child's future schooling. The special education teachers could use the information within the map to pinpoint accommodations and modifications for each student to allow each child to develop the skills necessary for success while being mindful of the individual disability. Therefore, the reading and English curriculum adheres to the school's mission statement of discovering, developing, and achieving the potential within all students.

### **1c. Mathematics**

The teachers at Houston Elementary School have been using a mathematics curriculum that is based on incremental development and continual review for years with great success. Developmentally speaking, students are ready to learn mathematical concepts at different times; therefore, the mathematics curriculum allows for students to continue to be exposed to concepts each day, affording them the opportunity to have continual practice as they work toward mastery of the concept. Since the mathematical concepts are broken into smaller, more manageable instructional segments, the students who are not yet developmentally ready for an entire unit on a topic have a greater chance of grasping the smaller pieces and will not suffer the frustration of failing an entire unit due to the inability to understand the mathematical concepts required for success. The teachers also recognize that mastery in mathematical concepts comes with proficient practice; therefore, students need to correct the problems they computed incorrectly each day. The students know they can continually improve their homework grade so they see the benefit in correcting their work; the teachers understand that timely feedback assists the students so the students do not become habituated to an incorrect method of solving problems.

Students' abilities in mathematics are monitored by the classroom teachers on a daily basis. If a student who has not been identified for special education services demonstrates an inability to learn multiple concepts, the student is referred to the Student Support Team. This team looks at the data, which includes test and homework grades as well as math computation curriculum-based measures, to decide if this student would benefit from additional interventions provided in the What I Need program, the intervention program at Houston Elementary School.

The daily monitoring of concept acquisition within the general education classroom also assists the intervention and special education teachers in knowing the specific skills that are causing the struggles for the student. When a student is struggling, the intervention or special education teacher reteaches the concept using a different method than the one used in the general education classroom for whole group instruction. Intervention and special education teachers use manipulatives to provide concrete, hands-on learning opportunities for those students who learn better in a kinesthetic manner. Other students are provided games that require the student to use the concept but have fun while they are applying a burgeoning skill. These non-threatening methods to assist the students in developing skills that are daunting for them follows the philosophy of the staff at Houston Elementary School to assist each child in achieving his or her potential.

The students who learn concepts quickly are allowed to work ahead and have the opportunity to join the Math Masters team. The Math Masters coach works with each student to delve deeper in the foundational knowledge required for mathematics and assists students in real-world problem solving that requires each student to apply the mathematical concepts in new ways, thereby encouraging the student to utilize higher order thinking skills.

### **1d. Science**

In the spring of 2015, the District adopted the goal of infusing all the curricula with aspects of STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics). The science curriculum and the instruction of that curriculum became a larger focus for the staff than it had been in previous years. This focus has

provided rewards in the form of test results on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment in Science with 71.4 percent of the fifth graders receiving proficiency on the test.

More important than test results, the students and the teachers have demonstrated an inquisitiveness with the concepts and information within the science curriculum. This interest is best demonstrated through the school-wide science fair in which the students individually select an experiment or topic, and with the help of the media/ gifted-and-talented teacher and the classroom teachers, display this learning through both written words and self-created models. Adults from the community who have backgrounds in science or engineering--such as the local dentist, a college anatomy instructor, and retired engineers--serve as judges for the projects created by the third through sixth grade students. Each student is interviewed as to the scientific foundation behind the experiment. The judges have been consistently impressed with the knowledge of the students, their ability to communicate the science at work in their experiment and the quality of the products they created. Students look forward to this science fair each year, which encourages the students to dig into each science lesson with an eye toward the potential for a science fair project that could improve on the project they or their siblings had completed before. This follows the philosophy of continuous improvement embraced by the staff at Houston Elementary School.

#### **1e. Social studies/history/civic learning and engagement**

History and geography are at the heart of the Core Knowledge philosophy of creating students who are culturally literate. World and national history are instructed with an eye to preparing students to be active participants in the democratic society. The students are not taught what to think but are instead exposed to diverse perspectives concerning the significant historical events that have shaped the world as we know it. In this way, students can see and understand the elements from Ancient Greece, Egypt and Rome that still provide some direction for government and societies today. Every historical event is taught with the themes of geography in mind since these themes oftentimes shaped the actions and reactions of the people.

Teachers, when mapping their reading selections, aligned the prose and poetry to the timing of the instruction of different elements within the social studies curriculum. For example, the second grade reads a nonfiction story about finding King Tutankhamun's tomb on the same day that they begin to learn about Ancient Egypt in their social studies time. Through this cohesive approach, the teachers are able to provide the connections the students need to retain the knowledge.

The teachers have completed the curriculum mapping for the social studies curriculum to ensure that the standards and benchmarks outlined by the Minnesota Department of Education are addressed. With this curriculum road map in mind, teachers have a greater ability to differentiate instruction for those students who struggle and those who need more challenging work. The students demonstrate their knowledge in a multitude of ways in social studies beyond the pencil-and-paper tests. Students are encouraged to write vignettes that can be presented to the class or create poems about the topics or events instructed. In this way the teachers are encouraging the students to use the higher order thinking skills required to create products from the learning.

#### **1f. For secondary schools:**

#### **1g. For schools that offer preschool for three- and/or four-year old students:**

The preschool program, which is administered by the school, uses a comprehensive, research-based curriculum carefully designed to provide a rich academic foundation and foster child creativity, confidence and independence. This curriculum uses defined teaching practices that are research based and shown to produce highly effective instruction. The preschool students are team taught by the general education and special education teacher since the special education students are mainstreamed within the preschool. Both teachers use the curriculum and differentiate the material based on the needs and developmental ability of each student. The preschool program has achieved Four-Star Parent Aware status through the Minnesota Department of Education, demonstrating that the program uses the best practices identified by research that help children succeed.

The majority of the eligible students in the Houston School District attend the preschool program, which is a large part of the reason the kindergarten students start kindergarten ready for school. Last year, almost 90 percent of the kindergarten class had attended Houston preschool. The students not only learn early literacy and numeracy, but they are also explicitly instructed in social and emotional learning. The social and emotional learning lessons help them develop the skills necessary to recognize frustration and other emotions that could pose obstacles to their learning. From their first days in school, the students learn that the school is a community, and they are here to learn how to be productive and positive members of that community. The students know they are supported in that journey by not only their teachers but by their fellow classmates as well. This stage of the students' education provides the foundation of the philosophy of civic engagement this is infused throughout the classrooms at Houston Elementary School.

## **2. Other Curriculum Areas:**

Houston Elementary School has a robust selection of non-core subjects for the students. Every student in grades kindergarten through grade six attends two of the following four non-core subjects every day: physical education, media, visual arts, and music classes. Each of these classes follows the Core Knowledge sequence of topics. For example, as a class is learning about the pioneer towns of the Western United States, those students will be learning square dancing in physical education, folk art in art class, early American music in music class, and coding to create their own version of Oregon Trail in media class. These interdisciplinary units build on the acquisition of knowledge since each new skill is rooted in the topic addressed within the general education classroom and allow the students to connect the new learning to the knowledge they acquired in their classroom. This instructional model also breaks down the siloed learning that sometimes can occur in schools. The students know they will need to apply what they have learned in one subject or class to the new learning in another subject or class. In addition to these four non-core areas, once a week every student has explicit instruction in social and emotional learning when the social worker comes to the classroom.

Since physical activity is a vital component of a healthy child's life, the physical education teacher, when working on his Master's Degree, created units of study for each of the grades so that skills and knowledge could be spiraled through the years. The teacher focused on activities that could promote fitness for life since the activities are based on sports and skills that could be used throughout the students' lives.

The students present concerts three times a year to the community. In these concerts, the students not only display the musical abilities they are developing in music class, but the walls of the gymnasium are lined with their artwork as well. The concerts serve to highlight the artistic development that is occurring within the art and music programs at Houston Elementary School. More importantly, the concerts serve to assist the students in public speaking and overcoming the potentials of stage fright. Communication and being able to speak to large groups are vital skills to develop. The students at Houston Elementary School start developing these skills while in kindergarten so that by the time they are in fifth and sixth grades they can confidently participate in the Veterans Day program. During the program the students read original poems and prose and sing patriotic songs to honor the veterans from the community who are invited to the presentation. The sixth grade class starts working on the program in the fall of the year in preparation for the November 11 presentation. The other classes contribute by creating works of artwork in art class that align with the theme and by learning songs that their class sings at the program. The Veterans Day program has become an event that is attended by the entire community and allows the community to see the polished, poised students who are attending Houston Elementary School.

Students, starting in fifth grade, can join the band by learning to play an instrument. Each instrumental section has weekly group lessons, and the band as a whole begins having full-group practices each week the month prior to a concert. Any student who wants to join the band is welcomed, and those students who cannot afford to buy an instrument may use a school-owned instrument. Houston Elementary School has always had very high participation in the fifth and sixth grade band with 80 to 90 percent of the classes joining the group. Learning to read music, as the students do as they participate in the band, has provided the added benefit of improving reading skills since music, like reading, requires the students to convert symbols, whether notes or letters, to sense, as in comprehension and melodies.

### **3. Academic Supports:**

#### **3a. Students performing below grade level**

WIN stands for "What I Need." At Houston Elementary School, this daily 30-minute time for reading and 20-minute time for mathematics is dedicated to students receiving the kinds of instruction and intervention uniquely needed by each child. The WIN groups are designed to be a tiered form of intervention. These groups are fluid: as students master skills, they can move to a different group. If a standardized test score or a teacher's observation indicates the student might have a deficit in learning, the child can be moved to a group better suited to meet the child's needs. The WIN time also allows for the students who need special education direct supports to receive this instruction at this time, thereby removing the stigma of leaving the classroom for special education assistance since all students are moving from room to room at this time.

In the WIN reading classes, students work on comprehension, fluency, phonemic awareness, decoding, vocabulary, accuracy and more. In the WIN mathematics classes, students work on numeracy, computation, problem solving and application of mathematical concepts. Proven practices are utilized to deliver a strong, focused intervention time. Data is collected to track student progress. The WIN classes for the academically struggling students are designed for up to 20 percent of the entire grade with the goal to decrease that percentage to achieve 100 percent of the students demonstrating grade-level skills by the end of the year.

In addition to the WIN time, Houston Elementary School provides Title 1 services to the students within the general education classroom. Once again to avoid any unintended stigma, the help is offered to any child who requests it, not just those who have been designated as students who need Title 1 supports. Those children who have been designated always receive the assistance, but in opening the assistance to all, the students do not know which students have been designated and which students have not.

#### **3b. Students performing above grade level**

At Houston Elementary School, the LEAP program addresses the needs of those students who exhibit above grade level skills. LEAP stands for Learning Enrichment Activity Programming and was designed with the belief that every student is uniquely talented. During the WIN time in each class, some students who have exhibited prowess in the material being instructed in the general education classroom have the opportunity to go to the LEAP room. In the LEAP room the students expand their knowledge and abilities within their talent area. One example of a reading enrichment activity is writing sequels to stories based on the textual evidence and evaluation of the character development in the stories they have read for class. This enrichment solidifies the reading strategies of prediction and plot analysis and fosters creativity in the creation of a new story line.

The LEAP session is timed to hone the problem-solving and higher order thinking skills for the students, whether that session is during WIN reading or mathematics time. During the mathematics time, the students in fifth and sixth grade are challenged to develop the skills necessary to compete in Math Masters, a regional mathematics competition in which teams of five students per grade compete against teams from other area schools. The students in the primary grades are challenged with more complex applications of the mathematical concepts instructed in the general education classroom and with developing the problem-solving skills necessary for more advanced coding than the basic coding instructed in media class.

Beyond the importance of the challenging and engaging activities is the importance of the fluidity of the student population in the LEAP classroom. Every student knows that he or she has the opportunity to attend the LEAP session if he or she is doing well in class, which follows the philosophy that every child can learn and succeed.

#### **3c. Special education**

The special education population at Houston Elementary School is disproportionately high according to the Minnesota Department of Education since almost one fourth of the student population qualifies for some special education services. The percentage of students who are on an Individualized Education Plan is

greater in the preschool and primary grades since many of the students have been identified for speech and language deficits that can be rectified by early, effective interventions by the time the student is in upper elementary school.

Using the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessment results, Houston Elementary special education students do exhibit an achievement gap as compared to their non-disabled classmates. However, even though the gap is over 20 percent looking at proficiency on both the tests of mathematics and reading, this gap is not totally bleak. In looking at the three-year average of test scores in mathematics, the group as a whole demonstrated that 73.7 percent were able to demonstrate proficiency on the mathematics assessment, while only 48.7 percent of the special education population demonstrated grade-level abilities. Comparing this to the same populations at the state level, the achievement gap demonstrated in Houston was smaller than the achievement gap state-wide. The scores on the reading accountability tests were similar with the whole group achieving a 69.2 percent level of proficiency, while only 41.8 percent of the special education population were proficient. Once again, the achievement gap demonstrated in Houston was less than the gap that exists state-wide.

This achievement gap is being addressed through differentiated instruction using research-based interventions. The students receive instruction in their general education classrooms and targeted instruction in the special education classroom. Therefore, the students are given more opportunities to learn the necessary concepts than if the classroom instruction were supplanted.

**3d.** ELLs, if a special program or intervention is offered

**3e.** Other populations (e.g., migrant), if a special program or intervention is offered

## **PART V – SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE**

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### **1. Engaging Students:**

Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) has transformed the way students and staff view everyday activities at Houston Elementary School, from a personal greeting each morning to an individual goodbye at the end of the day. Staff members are looking to use positive acknowledgements to help guide students toward positive behavior. Each year during the first week of school, students and staff are reminded of the expectations and rewards of PBIS. Students are welcomed with "Star Wars" music to Focus Ourselves on Respect for Community Excellence (F.O.R.C.E.). Various staff teach the expectations for their area or classroom, and posters are hung throughout the school with reminders of expectations.

All staff members have the ability to give individual tickets acknowledging positive student behavior. These tickets can then be redeemed for rewards such as F.O.R.C.E. t-shirts, pencil pouches, sunglasses, and more. The students can also exchange those tickets for lunch cafe opportunities to enjoy lunch in a special location with tablecloths, music and special friends. These lunches often include dining with the principal while enjoying dessert. Other options might include a movie or game bag to take home and enjoy with their families.

As well as giving out individual tickets, all staff and substitutes can award an entire class a golden award. Each golden award is celebrated over the school announcements the next day. For each award earned, the class posts a F.O.R.C.E. letter outside their room. Spelling out the word "FORCE" creates a lot of excitement for the students since it helps students practice social skills learned in the classroom and creates an incentive to follow through with those skills in all areas of the school. When F.O.R.C.E. is spelled, teachers and students plan a special event with just their class. Some of the options have been pajama day with a movie, Bingo with prizes, or a pizza party for lunch in the classroom, just to name a few.

PBIS has also been solidified by the explicit instruction by the school social worker of social and emotional learning topics. Using the guidance from the Minnesota Department of Education, the social worker, with developmentally appropriate activities, helps the students develop skills in each of the five core competencies of social and emotional learning. Adding the explicit instruction of social and emotional learning competencies has provided staff and students a shared vocabulary and understanding of the desired behaviors.

### **2. Engaging Families and Community:**

Houston Elementary School begins the connection to families and the community from the beginning days of the child entering the school. Early childhood education provides monthly meetings for parents with small children, providing childcare and activities for the children so parents can have the time to learn without distractions.

Kindergarten is the next big step in a child's journey as a life-long learner. To ensure a smooth transition into kindergarten, the school hosts kinder connection sessions to help prepare for this transition. Kinder connection sessions help create enthusiasm by allowing children to explore and play in the kindergarten classrooms, becoming familiar with the building and new environment; by developing relationships with teachers and peers; by providing parents with school readiness skills and tips for their child; and by helping students and parents learn about a typical school day and kindergarten expectations.

During the sessions, children participate in literacy, math and STEAM activities that prepare them for kindergarten. The play-based activities help the children become comfortable in the new classroom setting and highlight skills that parents should be fostering at home. At the end of the sessions, students take home materials that promote fine motor skills and books to promote literacy skills.

Literacy continues as a family engagement focus with Family Literacy Night, which is held in the spring of each year. Family Literacy Night is a free event facilitated by the teachers and staff of Houston Elementary

School and open to the whole community. The biggest component of the evening is "Bringing Books to Life." Bringing Books to Life is a chance for teachers, community members and special groups to present a book read aloud. While reading aloud, they bring the book to life using costumes and props. Besides attending the multiple rooms in which books are being brought to life, attendees have the opportunity to participate in other activities, too. Free literacy-based craft projects give the children a chance to express themselves creatively. Students may play bingo to win books and eat snacks, which gives time for both students and parents to relax and visit with each other. The local librarian is also available to promote the upcoming summer reading program and answer any questions parents might have about the library and library events. Each child leaves the event with at least one free book and many positive memories.

### **3. Creating Professional Culture:**

Most of the teachers at Houston Elementary School have completed their Master's Degree in Education. In fact, five of the teachers graduated from the same program last year. The school district placed such a high value on teachers earning advanced degrees that each teacher is afforded the opportunity to have up to six graduate credits reimbursed each school year by the district. In this way, the teachers are encouraged to enroll in a master's program and demonstrate to their students that everyone can be a student and continue to learn throughout life. This benefit is one of the factors that made Houston Elementary School attractive to the teachers when they originally applied for employment.

The district is also supportive of staff development that occurs within the school. The school is a Q Comp school, meaning that the school has a state-approved staff development plan that provides peer mentoring and coaching for each of the teachers. The teachers are also given the opportunity to advance their skills by participating in professional learning communities (PLC). These groups provide another layer of professional support for the teachers as they complete the action research that is required each year within the Q Comp plan. The Q Comp plan would not be as successful without the teacher leaders who step up to facilitate a PLC or serve as the mentor teacher. Therefore, the teachers know as they are participating in their own PLC or working with a mentor to improve their instructional techniques or achieve their own professional goals, they are also working to develop the skills and abilities they will need when and if they want to become a coach or a mentor.

As re-licensure requirements became more numerous, the teachers, who valued the ability to select their own professional activities that provided the support for their personal goals, felt that benefit was disappearing. The district now ensures that each teacher, within a five-year span, will have had the necessary trainings for license renewal provided during staff development time at school; therefore, each teacher can use the two professional days per year on activities that are a passion for that teacher and of the teacher's choosing.

All of this professional development contributes to helping the teachers develop the skills and abilities to produce the most positive results possible within the classroom as can be demonstrated by every teacher last spring achieving his or her student achievement goal.

### **4. School Leadership:**

Houston Elementary School is led by a principal who started his career as a sixth-grade teacher at the school. Ten years later, he became the principal and has been in the position for twenty-four years. The superintendent at Houston Public Schools knows the elementary school well since she attended Houston Elementary School as a child. After returning to Houston, she served as the Director of Curriculum and Instruction for sixteen years, writing many of the applications for the programs that have helped to make Houston Elementary School successful, before becoming the superintendent six years ago.

The vision for the leadership of the school is shared by these two individuals in that they both believe the best leaders support their employees by being a coach, mentor or parent-figure to each employee. The philosophy is not a top-down leadership model, but instead it is a transformational model that seeks to lift up the employees to help them each develop their own leadership capabilities. This model has been instrumental in creating the early adopter teams for new programs and initiatives started at Houston

Elementary School. As staff members seek to embrace the continuous improvement philosophy and have a passion for a particular improvement, the administrators work with these ad hoc teams to navigate the implementation pitfalls and create deployment plans and strategies. Teachers know they have the opportunity to lead an initiative if they have a passion and desire for the topic.

This leadership style has allowed for and fostered the creation of Level 3 special education services provided at the school and within the school day, of school-aged daycare provided before and after school with homework assistance for any students who attend the program, of media classes for every student in kindergarten through grade six so students can become computer literate and learn to code, and of a Veterans Day program that has been used as a model of what could be for several area schools, just to name a few. Each of these started as an idea brought to the administrators by a teacher or small group of teachers who had a dream or a passion. Each program has become a part of the fabric of Houston Elementary School and part of the success and the service provided to students, parents and community. Working together for continuous improvement, we follow our vision of Leading in Learning.

## **PART VI - STRATEGY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

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Houston Elementary School staff had been following the goal of continuous improvement from the late 1990s; however, the gap between the students who were economically disadvantaged and their economically advantaged counterparts was pernicious and large with a 43 percent discrepancy. In 2010, Houston Elementary School applied for funding to allow the district to hire an intervention teacher, a staff addition that would not be possible without the additional funds due to budgetary constraints. Following the typical process for changes and improvements, once the funding was secured, the teachers worked together to create a schedule that allowed for dedicated time each day for the intervention teacher to work with the targeted students. Students were targeted not by economic status, but by their achievement on the Minnesota Comprehensive Assessments the previous year. By targeting every student who failed to meet grade-level competencies, the program would still be targeting those economically disadvantaged students who had not been able to achieve grade-level status without infringing on their data privacy.

The close working arrangement among the teachers also afforded the opportunity for the intervention teacher to work with the classroom teachers to develop the interventions that best fit each student's needs. By the end of the 2010-2011 school year, the 43 percent gap had closed to only 20 percent in reading. Therefore, the program was expanded with the help of additional funding to include an intervention teacher for mathematics the next year. This program has developed into the WIN (What I Need) program that is a vital piece of the educational system at Houston Elementary School since it continues to help close the gap that is caused by economic adversity. During the time the students are in the WIN session, their classmates are either in enrichment sessions, general education sessions, or special education interventions so each student is receiving the "just right" instruction. The groups are fluid, and most of the time have very different populations for math and reading. Consequently, the students are accustomed to the fluid nature of the groups and place no stigma or significance on any one group. This program has been working well and has been improving since its implementation. In 2019, the gap between the socio-economic groups still existed, but it had been reduced to 5.7 percent in mathematics and 7.9 percent in reading. We are getting closer to achieving the goal of gap elimination.