

HP LITERACY COALITION

Bryce Benson
Incumbent HPISD Trustee, Place 3, 2022 Election
(Unopposed)

Some HPISD board members, educators, and parents have expressed concerns with the district's approach to literacy. What is your take on this issue?

It is probably apparent that I have concerns, given my role on the Board's ELA subcommittee (the subcommittee was convened due to the concerns of some trustees). I first expressed concerns about the district's approach to literacy a year ago, prior to being sworn in as a trustee in May 2021. After nearly a year's worth of work, we have made a decision to phase out the Calkins Units of Study. We are also revisiting the district's ELA framework and making several other positive changes, such as adding a grammar resource. I firmly believe that these changes will be very positive for the district and our kids.

HB 3, passed in 2019, contains several reading elements (ie Texas Reading Academies investment in mandatory teacher training in the Science of Reading and the new requirement for districts to adopt a systematic phonics program). What do you believe the intent is behind the reading initiatives in this law?

Having read HB 3 and spoken to a number of literacy experts about its content, it is evident that the Legislature's intent was to ensure Texas public schools are teaching students to learn to read in a way that aligns with the Science of Teaching Reading. In fact, HB 3 requires principals and teachers to attend Reading Academies that adhere to this philosophy. Many state legislatures across the country have taken such action, and it is a reaction to the pervasiveness of reading strategies that do not emphasize explicit phonics instruction, which is not aligned with the Science of Teaching Reading.

How does HPISD's Balanced Literacy Framework, including instructional materials such as Lucy Calkins Units of Study and Fountas & Pinnell, align with the reading initiatives in House Bill 3 — and the significant body of research around the Science of Reading?

Fundamentally, the Units of Study and Fountas & Pinnell are at odds with the Science of Teaching Reading – hence, our decision to phase out those instructional materials. Now, our district was supplementing with other resources but I believe we

should identify a resource without core flaws that does not require such extensive supplementation (and frankly, extra work for teachers). We will be revisiting the district's literacy framework over the summer and will ensure it aligns with the Science of Teaching Reading.

Texas law says district Board of Trustees “shall provide oversight regarding student academic achievement and strategic leadership for maximizing student performance.” (TEC 11.1515) Can you describe what you think this should look like for a Trustee in the current conversation around literacy?

Ultimately, the board is responsible for student achievement. If our current resources are not supporting student achievement in literacy, and may even hinder growth and contravene HB 3, then I feel like the board should take action (and we have). In addition, the board is routinely asked to approve text books and instructional materials for literacy and other subjects. Our community is unique and I view the approval process through the lens of whether the resource is appropriate for Highland Park. If I am being asked to vote yes or no, I want to be knowledgeable and informed about what I am being asked to approve. With regard to this part of the role of trustee, I feel a particular responsibility to this community and our children.