

# HP LITERACY COALITION

## Spencer Siino Candidate for HPISD Trustee, Place 5, 2022 Election

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

First, I distinguish between “the District” and “the Administration.” The District is our community - the people who live here and the layout of our town, and the Administration is our employees. The Administration has been making all of the decisions, which the Board, who is supposed to represent the District, has rubber-stamped. Unfortunately, the Administration has imported the Texas Association of School Administrator’s (TASA) Vision, which seeks to transform education in the state of Texas in alignment with the National Education Technology Plan. Balanced Literacy is a key step in TASA’s Vision.

The Administration’s philosophy on English Language Arts (ELA) classes suppresses our children’s potential and disrespects their limited time in school. Across all grades, ELA classes (K-12) have become vocational reading and writing classes. The bar has been lowered to developing “skills transferable to the workplace.” Our children have painfully lost too many opportunities to study exemplary works that elevate the mind, develop an appreciation for ideas and an “ear for good writing”.

For ELA K-8 classes, with the stamp of approval from our trustees, the Administration not only adopted but uniformly enforces a Balanced Literacy Framework. I believe in instructional independence and do not support mandating teachers to practice any one method. I prefer teachers utilize tried and proven pedagogies found in the Classical model of education. Therefore, it is mind-boggling that the School Board proceeds to dither on a decision regarding Lucy Calkins Units of Study when it is a proven failure in teaching children to read and write well. The Administration should immediately release any Balanced Literacy requirements and restore teacher freedom to work on behalf of students. I find it curious that our Administration uses Take Flight, which is basically old-school phonics, only for dyslexia intervention.

I agree with the Literacy Coalition that instruction in reading and writing must return to being more explicit, systematic, and interactive (between teacher and student). I agree we should return to that which works well and consistently seek to improve. I agree that whole class, whole novel studies are necessary for the priceless practices

of debate and conversation. I agree that reading selections should constantly challenge our students, not “dumb them down”.

For all these reasons I advocate for a return to Classical education, a broad framework developed over thousands of years, which successfully educated the most important minds in the history of the world and has recently been resurrected with incredible success.

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

HB3 constitutes a state takeover of reading instruction methodology in the name of “Science”. The state could have just as easily offered resources to teachers without mandating them. The state’s actions must be understood correctly in the context of their publicly stated guiding vision: the expansion of virtual learning and the continuous digital technology integration of the education space. Given their stated agenda, one must expect mandatory “Science of Reading” instruction to eventually mean an online reading program.

I do not support educational technology (“EdTech”), which has been a proven failure for educational outcomes. I’m concerned that the EdTech industry will co-opt the Science of Reading as a Trojan Horse to sell more software. I will advocate for HPISD to assert its independence from state mandates at every turn, including by utilizing a Trustee’s authority, which few others in the state possess, to request legal opinions from the Texas Attorney General.

***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?***

I don’t believe the Balanced Literacy Framework aligns with HB3, but I intend to make both irrelevant. A vote for me is a vote to return to the tried and proven methods that have worked very effectively to teach children how to read for thousands of years.

I do not believe we need any new methods, which frankly amounts to experimentation on children when we have such well-vetted, proven pedagogies. I’m also against a state law prescribing a method for how children should be taught.

When I'm elected, we will replace our Superintendent with a Classical educator who is not beholden to the TEA and will replace Lucy Calkins and Fountas & Pinnell with an analog, teacher-led framework rooted in phonics.

***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?***

The Board of Trustees should favor legitimate parent interests over the blind trust of administrators and take prompt action to replace administrative personnel when their vision for education clearly conflicts with that of the community.

Next, the Board of Trustees must respect the importance of education by recognizing that there is no time to squander when ineffective or harmful approaches, methods and/or materials and people stand in our children's way. They must act promptly to remove them.

Finally, the Board of Trustees cannot veritably provide any oversight over educational technologies, whose adaptive assessment and instruction algorithms cannot be vetted. Daily instruction and assessment must reside with human teachers for any real accountability.

The problems with Balanced Literacy approaches and frankly EVERY other piece of curriculum adopted by our Administration and approved by our Board in recent years were obvious enough for me as a parent to take the incredibly difficult action of pulling my children from Highland Park schools. Unlike my opponent, who said at a Board meeting that she trusts the Board that approved Lucy Calkins entirely on curriculum, I do not intend to spend my first year as a trustee getting up to speed. In fact, I've made clear to the community my intention to propose a resolution to replace our Superintendent with a Classical educator at my first meeting.

A few trustees have been working to remove Balanced Literacy for almost a year now to no avail, and the Administration has been fighting them at every step. What will it take for them to recognize that these employees have an agenda that does align with parents? Because I've been uniquely clear and specific on my plan as a candidate, when I'm elected, the other trustees would have to go against the clear will of the community to not second and ultimately vote for this positive change, which in my estimation, is necessary to fix literacy at HPISD.

Classical education is not only foundational, rigorous, and fruitful, it's timeless. A Classical educator will return us to a focus on reading, writing, math, science, real history and the great books, poetry, and essays (the classics) that informed the

development of Western Civilization. A Classical educator understands the perils of technology in the classroom. Finally, a Classical educator will not be beholden to outside interest groups such as TASA and TASB, or the political influences that led to the disastrous Covid policies that so badly delayed the development of our children's reading and writing skills.