Houston ISD
STAAR Communications
NSPRA Gold Medallion Entry
► PROJECT OVERVIEW

High-stakes testing is nothing new, but in 2011, Texas students began the transition to a more rigorous accountability system with an unprecedented focus on measuring college readiness. Rather than four exit-level tests, high school students would need to pass 14 end-of-course exams in order to graduate under a recommended program. The new requirements were dramatic and complex, and in many ways mysterious even to those with the most access to information.

In a district that covers more than 300 square miles and where 80% of students are considered economically disadvantaged, our goal was ambitious: to make sure every student and parent had information and the opportunity to engage with HISD to ease their concerns and be prepared for the test.

Communications staff met with administrators, teachers, and students to determine the most prescient questions surrounding STAAR and weigh the various means of reaching every household in the district.

We then researched the available information from the Texas Education Agency, met with district decision-makers to clarify what those changes would mean for HISD students, then began rolling out a multifaceted communications effort that included live TV forums in English and Spanish; workshops led by parent specialists and principals explaining the changes; and a website, Twitter account, and FAQ blog where readers could post questions and receive answers directly from HISD staff.

Whether in person, via call-in show, or through interactive media, everyone in HISD’s school community had the opportunity to engage in a dialogue around STAAR. We covered topics ranging from scoring requirements, test anxiety, and test-taking strategies. Ultimately, nearly 85% of parents and students surveyed said our efforts helped them understand STAAR.
PROGRAM/PROJECT SUMMARY

► RESEARCH

As schools across Texas began the transition to a new, more rigorous statewide testing system – STAAR – it became clear that HISD’s students and parents needed to understand the dramatic changes to the test and the profound impact those changes could have on graduation. Communications staff interviewed parents, students, and school-based and central office staff, and researched information from the Texas Education Agency. We also studied test question samples dating to 1986 to understand how STAAR’s level of rigor compared with previous assessments. As a result of the focus groups and research, we concluded:

- New testing requirements would be complex and difficult to explain to both parents and students.
- There were many unknowns: Passing requirements would not be revealed until after many students had taken the test, and several key decisions would be made by HISD as testing was under way.
- In general, students were intimidated by the increased rigor and nervous about how they would perform
- Parents had difficulty getting accurate and timely information about STAAR.

► ANALYSIS/PLANNING

By fall of 2011, the communications office had already distributed basic information about the STAAR test to parents, students, and staff members. We stepped up our efforts by forming a cross-functional task force to identify our audiences, tailor the message to each audience, and integrate multimedia with our traditional means of communications. Members from the communications office collaborated with staff from the academic and parent engagement departments to develop a detailed communications plan that was shared on the intranet, where participants would make regular updates. We agreed on the following goals:

- Build a greater understanding of STAAR among parents and students.
- Support principals in their communications efforts.
- Use multiple methods to truly engage the audience and create a two-way dialogue.
- Leverage Spanish-language media outlets to reach the district’s large Hispanic audience.

We agreed on using a combination of traditional and new media to maximize our reach to diverse audiences:

- HISD’s cable channel, other local TV stations, and local radio stations.
- Mailers and brochures in English/Spanish/Vietnamese.
- Forums and workshops at schools, district headquarters; and presence at other community events.
- STAAR Resources websites in English and Spanish.
- Interactive STAAR FAQ blog and blog hosted by local Spanish-language news outlet.
- Social media: @HISDSTAAR Twitter account, Twitter/Facebook campaigns in English and Spanish.

_We used multiple web platforms to provide information, as well as gather information about our audience and the resources they needed._ We analyzed web metrics (including search engine keywords) to shape our message and anticipate questions. When a topic was trending, we would push out information to maintain an ongoing, timely dialogue with parents, students, and even followers from outside the district.

► COMMUNICATIONS/IMPLEMENTATION

Here’s an overview of the communications activities that were implemented:

- **Presentations:** Powerpoint presentations with speaker’s notes were created for principals and parent engagement specialists to use at the elementary, middle and high school levels for parents, students, and staff. The presentations (in English, Spanish and Vietnamese) were updated as new information was released.

- **Community forums:** We hosted three community forums in English and Spanish that were televised on HISD’s cable channel and streamed on the website with Twitter feeds. Participants could ask questions in person, via
email, or on social media. Two of the forums included a live studio audience and a hotline fielded by specialists from central office. We used robo-calls to inform parents about the forums.

TV segments/STAAR videos: HISD produced 30-second PSAs that aired on two local stations during prime time over a two-month time period. STAAR was also featured on several HISD-TV talk shows and in HISD’s weekly newscast in English and Spanish, which is streamed on the web and cablecast three times a day on HISD’s 24-hour cable channel. We produced informational videos in English and Spanish that were used in school and community presentations. All videos aired on HISD-TV, the HISD YouTube channel, and were streamed on the web.

Partnership with Univision: We produced informational segments that aired on Univision – Houston’s largest Spanish-language media outlet. Univision also hosted a Spanish-language phone bank, with live cut-ins during primetime. More than a dozen HISD volunteers answered a total of 282 calls.

Radio: We booked HISD staff on popular talk radio programs that target African American and Hispanic audiences, the two largest student populations in HISD.

Online resources: We launched a STAAR Resources webpage (in English and Spanish), which included testing dates, videos, sample test questions, and information for students. As a companion to that site, we launched a STAAR FAQ blog, where readers could post questions. Parents and students could also email the district directly – we would share the resulting Q&A on our website and blog for the benefit of other readers.

Live web chat: We launched the district’s first live web chat, which was carried on the district’s homepage. We also partnered with the Houston Chronicle, the city’s major newspaper, to host the chat on their education blog.

Social media: Updates from the TEA and HISD were regularly shared on @HISDSTAAR. We also engaged audiences by posting sample questions on Facebook and challenging fans to answer them correctly. STAAR information was also shared on our Spanish-language Twitter account and Facebook page.

Print: Informational brochures on STAAR in English/Spanish/Vietnamese were mailed to students’ homes and delivered to schools at the beginning of the school year and again in the spring, before STAAR testing began.

► EVALUATION

In February, March and April of 2012, we surveyed 467 parents, students, teachers and community members about the effectiveness of our STAAR communications efforts. The results to date indicate our efforts are helping to build a greater understanding of STAAR among our key audiences:

- 84% found HISD’s STAAR communications helpful.
- The most helpful resource was FAQs/General information (38% of respondents), followed by Sample Test Questions and Testing Dates.

Web metrics show steady usage of our videos and interactive resources:

- 14,415 page views of STAAR Resources website
- 4,266 views of STAAR videos online
- 5,602 views of STAAR FAQ blog
- 121 questions fielded via STAAR email box and FAQ blog

What we learned:
In the survey comments, parents said they were confused by the changing nature of the information. Others expressed a desire for more sample questions, a detailed study guide, and clarification of promotion standards. Next steps: Principals and parents said the instructional videos were extremely helpful. We will produce more videos in the future based on grade or school level so more specific details can be included. Also, parents had difficulty finding sample questions. Delivering those as a study guide would help parents reinforce STAAR concepts at home, building confidence and familiarity with the format. It would also be worthwhile to develop a school-based campaign around STAAR, with posters and testing calendars to ensure vital information is highly visible.
Supporting Documents

- [Project Overview](#): presented at first meeting of communications task force
- [Communications Plan](#): developed based on first meeting

**ONLINE TOOLS developed:**

- [Houstonisd.org/STAAR](#)
- STAAR FAQ Blog
- STAAR Twitter

**PowerPoints developed for principals/parent specialists:**

- STAAR Overview PowerPoint Presentation
- Elementary Schools STAAR PowerPoint Presentation for Principals
- Middle Schools STAAR PowerPoint Presentation for Principals
- High Schools STAAR PowerPoint Presentation for Principals
- STAAR Community PowerPoint Presentations

**Videos developed:**

- STAAR PSA developed by HISD
- HISD News coverage of STAAR forum, web chat
- STAAR forum at HISD
- STAAR Info Session at HISD
- Video: Understanding the new STAAR Exam
- Video: Understanding Cumulative Scores

**HISD Web News Articles**

- STAAR to Replace TAKS in Coming School Year 6/9/11
- Trustees Learn More about STAAR at Board of Education Workshop 7/26/11
- Parent Involvement Day, STAAR Presentation Nov. 17 10/13/11
- Get a Glimpse of the STAAR Test at November 17 Info Session 11/15/11
- Students Begin Taking New STAAR State Assessment March 26 3/21/12
- HISD to host online Q&A chat on STAAR – join in today at noon 3/6/12
- HISD Reaches Out to Hispanic Community with Live STAAR Forum in Spanish 3/5/12
- HISD Partners with Univision to Host STAAR Phone Bank 3/1/12
- Get Answers to All Your STAAR Questions at Live Forum Tonight 2/22/12
- ‘STAAR Does Count’ – Parents Get Answers to Their Questions 2/20/12
- TEA Commissioner Defers STAAR 15% Requirement 2/17/12
- All HISD Parents Invited to Attend STAAR Info Session Tonight 2/15/12
- District Providing Parent Support for New STAAR Exam 2/8/12
- HISD Preparing Schools for New STAAR Test 1/24/12

**Print materials:**

- STAAR Events, Questions, and Dates Flier for Principals
- TAKS vs. STAAR Overview Flier
- HISD STAAR Brochure/Mailer