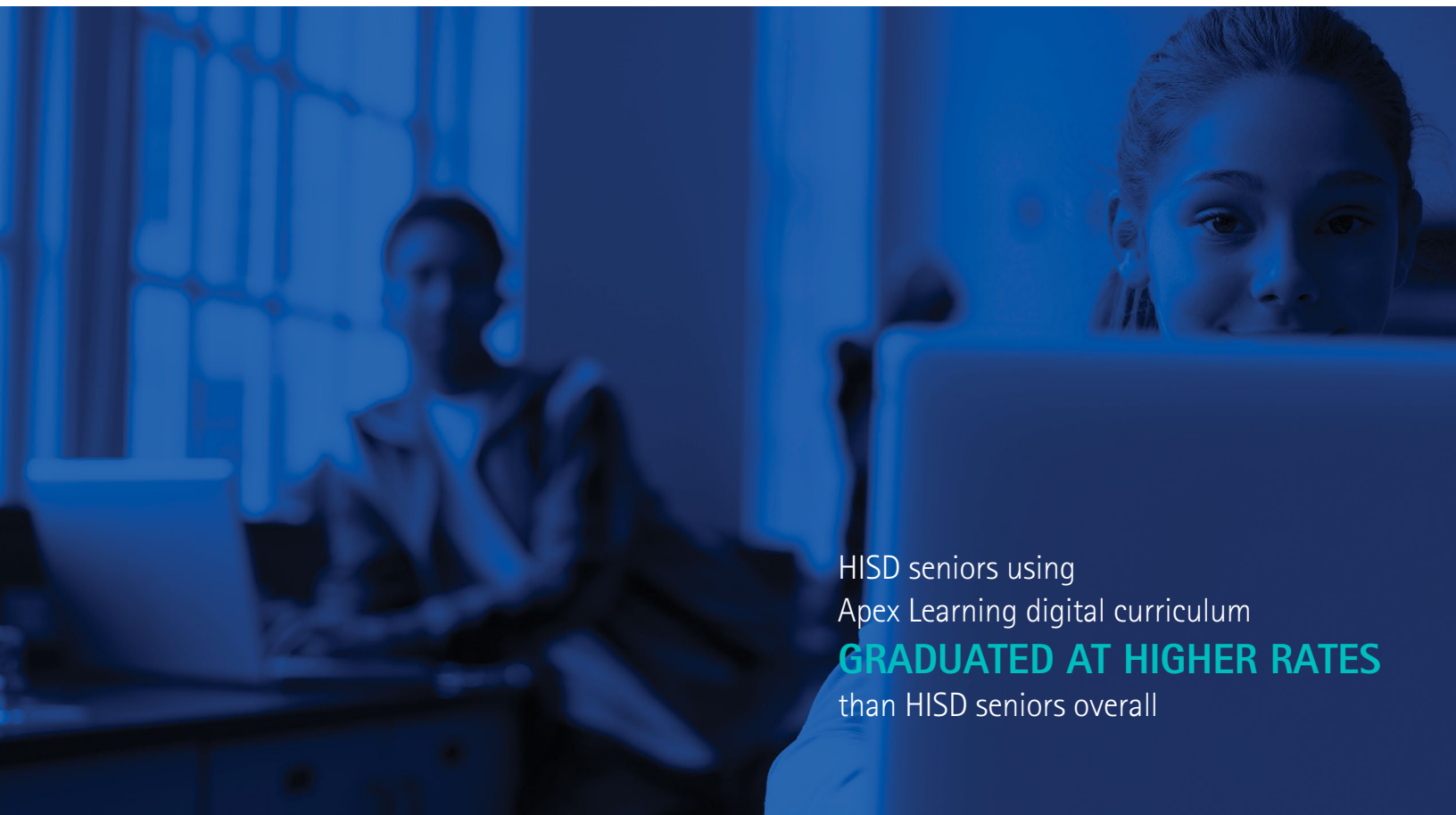# Apex Learning Digital Curriculum Proven to Increase Student Achievement in the Houston Independent School District GradLabs Initiative

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HISD seniors using
Apex Learning digital curriculum
GRADUATED AT HIGHER RATES
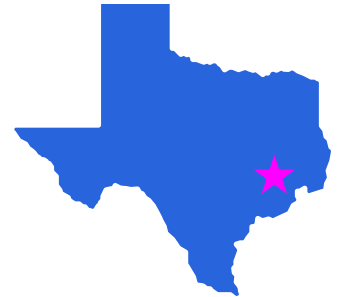than HISD seniors overall

Summary

Houston Independent School District (HISD), the largest school district in Texas and the seventh-largest school district in the nation, is located in one of the most diverse metropolitan areas in the United States. Faced with the challenge of meeting the needs of a diverse student population, district administrators are focused on increasing student achievement and ensuring all students are graduating ready for college and career. Underlying this goal is the desire to ensure that all students have access to rigorous, high-quality instruction, regardless of their individual level of academic readiness.

To support students struggling to stay on track to graduate, HISD administrators introduced Graduation Laboratories (GradLabs) into each high school during the 2010 – 2011 school year. The GradLabs Initiative was designed to increase the graduation rate by providing students with credit recovery and supplemental learning opportunities through online coursework and tutoring. Initially, GradLabs provided an alternative to the traditional classroom for seniors seeking to recover credits required for high school graduation. HISD administrators recognized a broader need for increased learning opportunities for all secondary students. As a result, they opened GradLabs participation to students in Grades 6 – 12 who were interested in completing courses for original credit outside of the regular classroom, in need of recovering credits, and seeking new approaches for remediation.

Knowing that students come to GradLabs with varying levels of academic readiness, HISD administrators were dedicated to creating a student-centered learning environment in which students receive the individualized support required to be successful. To offer a broad catalog of rigorous, standards-based digital curriculum designed to meet the needs of different learners, HISD selected Apex Learning as a partner. Apex Learning digital curriculum enables HISD to meet a wide range of student needs, including those of students who are struggling to graduate, students who perform at high levels, and students who are unable to attend traditional classes regularly (Department of Research and Accountability, 2013). Utilizing the flexibility of digital curriculum to meet students where they are and develop their capacities establishes an educational experience that is inclusive and effective for GradLabs students, many of whom HISD has identified as having low reading levels (Department of Research and Accountability, 2013).

District Profile

- Location: Houston, Texas
- Setting: Urban
- Program: GradLabs
- Environment: Virtual Learning

To understand the impact Apex Learning digital curriculum has on improving the graduation rate, the HISD Department of Research and Accountability conducted an evaluation of Apex Learning digital curriculum as used within the GradLabs Initiative over the 2011 – 2012 and 2012 – 2013 school years. The evaluation examined course usage, graduation rates, and academic achievement associated with Apex Learning digital curriculum usage. Based on district findings, the introduction of GradLabs and the use of Apex Learning digital curriculum have been instrumental in HISD's increased graduation rate.

The Results: District Graduation Rate

The evaluation by the HISD Department of Research and Accountability shows that HISD seniors who used Apex Learning digital curriculum in 2011 – 2012 graduated at higher rates than HISD seniors overall. HISD reports, "In 2011 – 2012, 93 percent of 12th-grade students who took an Apex Learning course graduated while 91 percent of all HISD 12th graders graduated during the same year," (Department of Research and Accountability, 2013, p. 2). Furthermore, students seeking to earn a diploma through the Minimum/Individualized Education Plan (IEP) had a higher rate of graduating when they took an Apex Learning course (28.9 percent) than did HISD students overall (19.1 percent) seeking the same type of diploma. These results suggest that struggling students who use Apex Learning digital curriculum graduate at higher rates than struggling HISD students overall.

Apex Learning digital curriculum supports student learning by making rigorous content accessible and engaging through the use of active learning strategies and opt-in scaffolding delivered at each student's level. Rather than expecting students to learn by passively watching, reading, and listening, Apex Learning digital curriculum helps students learn by doing. Additionally, because Apex Learning curriculum is self-paced, students can spend as much or as little time as they need on guided practice and support activities to master the content. The combination of these factors enables students to master the content they previously struggled with while acquiring a deeper understanding than they may have gained in a traditional classroom.

93%

of 12th-grade students who took an Apex Learning course **graduated.**
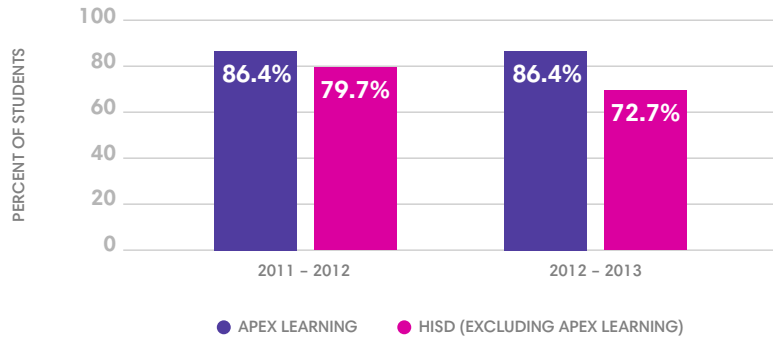
Table 1. Number and Percentage of HISD Graduates, 2011 – 2012			
	Diploma Type	Number	Percent
Apex Learning	Minimum/IEP	757	28.9
	Recommended	1,748	66.8
	Distinguished	110	4.2
Apex Learning Total		**2,615**	**99.9**
HISD Overall	Minimum/IEP	1,846	19.1
	Recommended	7,242	74.8
	Distinguished	596	6.2
HISD Total		**9,684**	**100.1**

Student Performance on State Assessments

Graph 1 shows that students who completed Apex Learning courses and took a state exam in the same subject as their Apex Learning course during the same school year, achieved satisfactory performance at a higher rate than did HISD students who did not use Apex Learning courses. The HISD Research and Accountability Office reported that, by subject, a significantly higher percentage of Apex Learning students achieved a satisfactory rating on standardized tests from 2011 to 2013, including STAAR EOC English I-Reading and World Geography exams than HISD students overall (Department of Research and Accountability, 2013).

A significantly higher percentage of Apex Learning students achieved a satisfactory rating on standardized tests from 2011 to 2013 than HISD students overall.

Percent Passing ACP Exam by School Year

Conclusion

The evaluation by the HISD Research and Accountability Office proves Apex Learning digital curriculum positively impacts student achievement. HISD administrators believe that "exposure to Apex Learning digital content has proven to be beneficial for students who took the Exit-Level TAKS and STAAR EOC exams" (Department of Research and Accountability, 2013, p. 3). According to the study, the benefit is not limited to performance on high-stakes exams. Students completing Apex Learning courses in 2011 – 2012 graduated at higher rates than HISD seniors overall (Department of Research and Accountability).

"exposure to Apex Learning digital content has proven to be beneficial for students who took the Exit-Level TAKS and STAAR EOC exams."

—Department of Research and Accountability, 2013, p. 3

References

Department of Research and Accountability. (November 2013). *Apex Learning Online Instruction*, 2012–2013. Houston, TX: Houston Independent School District.

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