

SUCCESS SPOTLIGHT

Texas School District Jumps from an F Rating to a B

Marlin Independent School District (Marlin ISD) was in crisis. Since 2010 it had received an F rating or “Improvement Required” by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) every year, and in 2014, the district lost its accreditation status.

In 2020, Marlin was losing its best students to other districts, and it was at risk of being shut down. But new leadership and a new assessment and personalized instruction tool—*i-Ready* from Curriculum Associates—helped turn things around, boosting the district’s grade level to a B and creating a sense of pride among the students and faculty.

Marlin ISD serves 880 elementary, middle, and high school students in the heart of Texas. The community is predominantly Black, and 95 percent of its students have economic disadvantages. For more

Marlin
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— Dr. Darryl Henson

than 10 years, Marlin ISD had been the lowest-ranked district in Texas and, as a result, was under state intervention. Because of low performance, many of the district's best students had requested to be bussed to other schools outside their district.

In May 2020, the TEA hired Dr. Darryl Henson, former math teacher and dynamic leader, to help turn things around. "I came in during the pandemic with a dollar and a dream," he said. "It was my obligation and my responsibility to protect these students—because they look like me, and they needed a chance. All they knew was dysfunction and failure."

With a daunting challenge in front of him, Henson brought in teachers he trusted to help lead the district's recovery. "I knew their heart for children," he said. "I knew they had a will to win." But passion and commitment could only go so far. "They had to understand curriculum instruction and assessment, and we needed to get to the nuts and bolts of how to improve educational outcomes," he said.

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What They Did



When Henson came on board, the average Marlin ISD student was two-and-a-half years below grade level, and many didn't even know who their principal was. The students were often reprimanded, and anxiety levels were high. Henson's immediate goal was to "change the culture—to **create a safe space where students could make mistakes, be children, and learn.**" The district retrained their teachers on the basics of instruction while also encouraging them to connect with their students as people and become more approachable. "I took a lot of the planning out of the teachers' hands and let them focus on delivery and that interpersonal human side of education that we often forget about," said Henson.



The district also **evaluated a number of products that would enable them to assess their students' skills and strengths while supporting their growth.** In fall 2021, the district implemented Curriculum Associates' *i-Ready Assessment* and Personalized Instruction for Grades K–8 Reading and Mathematics. "I was very mindful that any product I put in front of my students had to be vetted by me," said Henson. "I took the Diagnostic, was clicking around, and it was cool. I thought, 'If I'm engaged as a grown man, my students are going to be engaged.'"

After the students took the *i-Ready Diagnostics* for Mathematics and for Reading, the teachers could easily identify where the learning gaps were. The school had not been rated in 2020 because of the pandemic, but in 2019, the district had scored a cumulative 56 on the spring STAAR® exam.

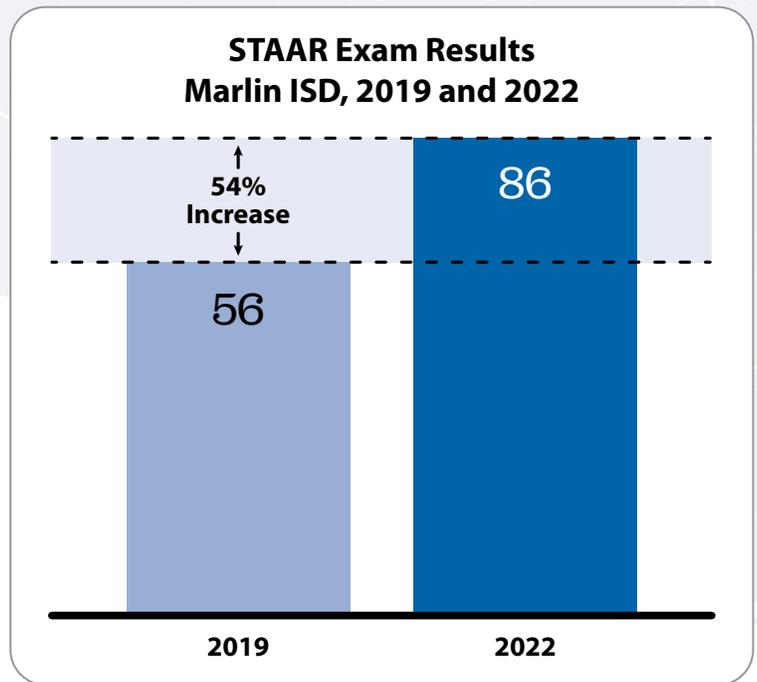


"We knew that while we had to teach grade-level content, we also had to address the vertically aligned state standards—all that prerequisite knowledge that was missing," said Henson. The district **extended its class periods by 25 minutes, and the teachers created "Know When" charts, so it was clear which standards the students had to master before moving on.** "We had to explicitly and deliberately teach the skills they hadn't learned," he said. And *i-Ready's* personalized progress monitoring tool allowed students to work independently and focus exactly where they needed to focus. "*i-Ready* truly made it easy for my teachers," said Henson. "More importantly, *i-Ready* worked, and it worked for some of the state's longest-struggling learners."

What They Accomplished

After taking the STAAR exam in spring 2022, the district saw remarkable progress—scoring an [86](#)—approximately a 54-percent increase from where they had been. And after a decade of failing, Marlin ISD finally received a B rating. To celebrate their districtwide success, they held a parade to kick off the 2022–2023 school year. “I’m always down for having a snow cone truck come to Marlin,” said Henson.

He and his staff continue to be visible and accessible. He even still teaches some classes. But so much of their success is tied to the fact that students are truly feeling cared for. Now those kids who were taking busses to different districts are finally coming back. “Our success was a team effort, and all teachers and staff played a part,” said Henson. By setting high expectations, believing in their staff and their students, they delivered. “I am overwhelmed with joy by the academic gains made by our students over the past two years. After a decade of unsatisfactory performance, to finally have the label of Improvement Required or F Rated removed is a testament to our commitment to excellence. This transformation will go down not only in the history books of Marlin ISD but in the history of Texas public school education. This is just the beginning, as I know that the best is yet to come for our students and school community.”



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