

HAYS CISD

As the Hays Consolidated Independent School District grows, district administrators trust K12 *Insight* to make sure staff and stakeholders have a voice and that they work collaboratively to tackle difficult community-based challenges.



THE LANDSCAPE

Hays County, Texas, has become a bedroom community of sorts for Austin and San Antonio—an affordable option for people working in these cities who want to raise their children in smaller neighborhoods with excellent schools. As the county’s neighborhoods attract young professionals looking to put down roots, the Hays Consolidated Independent School District has experienced enormous growth.

“We have 22 campuses,” explains Christina Courson, a communications specialist for the district. “We are in the process of building another middle school campus, which will be our sixth middle school. We’re looking ahead to a possible bond campaign to build high school No. 3, and we have other elementary schools that we need to build as well.”

According to Forbes magazine, last year Hays County was the third fastest-growing county in the United States.



THE CHALLENGE

Maintaining long-held traditions, while also encouraging educators to move students in new directions that will position them for success in college and the workforce, is a formidable challenge for any district—but for a school system with rapidly changing demographics, it amounts to a delicate balancing act.

“There are a lot of positives that come with growth,” Courson says. “We’re seeing more diversity in our schools. We’re seeing some international families come in. The small-town feel within Hays CISD is still very real, but the faces we’re seeing are changing. We see that as a good thing.”

At the same time, this new diversity occasionally causes friction as the district’s composition changes and its outlook continues to evolve.

“We’re trying to strike a balance between honoring our roots and our traditions while also welcoming newcomers and learning from them to help evolve the identity of the school district,” Courson says.



 www.hayscisid.net

 Kyle, Texas

 18,000 K-12 students

GOALS

- Improve customer service and engage the community by listening to all stakeholders.
- Balance competing concerns as the district continues to grow.

APPROACH

Connect with all stakeholder groups—students, staff, parents, and others—using focus groups, surveys, and an always-on listening tool.

PRODUCTS

Let's Talk!

Engage

Advisory Services



THE SOLUTION

The Hays CISD Board of Trustees has stated a desire to improve customer service in the district by putting students and parents first, while also connecting with them to solve some of the growing pains and challenges facing the district.

The district was already conducting surveys. But incoming Superintendent Mike McKie wanted to establish a more robust engagement plan. As a first step, the board decided to expand its school climate survey to students.

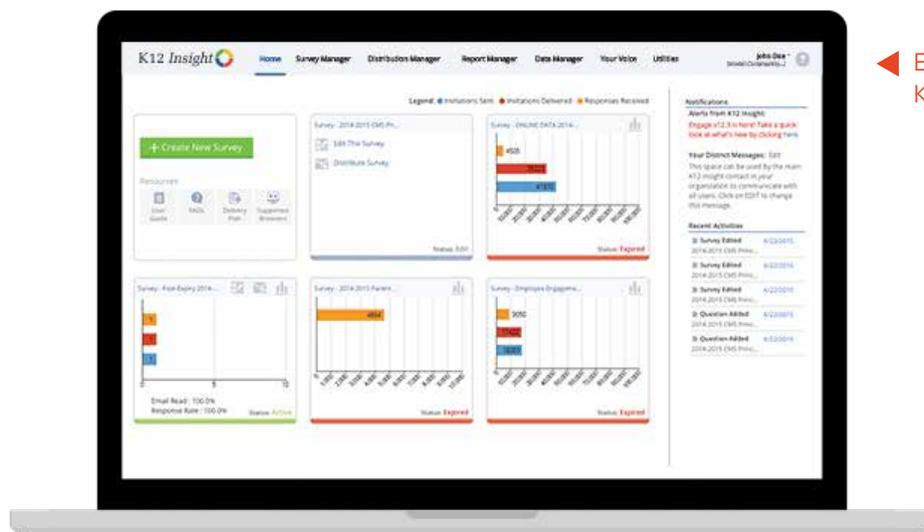
A request for proposals introduced them to the work of K12 *Insight*.

“K12 *Insight* came in and very quickly developed a survey instrument that had some of the questions the board wanted to follow, while at the same time providing us with some ideas on what we could do better or questions that we had not asked,” Courson says.

After completing the district’s annual survey, K12 *Insight*’s experienced team helped the district organize its future survey plans using Engage, a managed service that delivers a custom action plan for school districts, using equal parts technology and research.

“The team provided scaffolding for us at an urgent time, then gave us a breather and said, ‘All right, now let’s plan ahead.’ Having K12 *Insight* personally come out here to sit down with us, listen to what we needed, and help us plan for the year was awesome,” Courson says. “We were getting some guidance about a process to help us become more strategic in engaging our community.”

This guidance would become a recurring theme—and it would prove invaluable in helping the district navigate a future controversy at one of its elementary schools.



◀ Engage from K12 *Insight*

THE CONFLICT

Blanco Vista Elementary School houses the district’s dual-language immersion program. It also serves the district’s fast-growing community.

“With people from different backgrounds, with different values and priorities, it was difficult to get the campus united,” explains Courson of the growing pains. “It was difficult for community members to feel one Blanco Vista Elementary identity.”

In spring 2015, a group of stakeholders picketed the Blanco Vista campus to protest the school’s principal, voicing concerns about the integrity of the school’s language program and demanding that the principal be removed for cultural insensitivity.

“There was division,” Courson explains. “The principal was overwhelmed and was asking for help. We very quickly reached out to K12 *Insight* ... and said, ‘This is what’s going on. Can you help us with focus groups?’ They came out the following week. We were so fortunate to be able to get such a quick response, because it was a huge issue.”

District administrators knew they needed to act. With K12 *Insight*’s help, school system officials organized focus groups to get a handle on the community’s frustrations.

“We let K12 *Insight* take the wheel, because at that point, we felt it was going to take an outsider to come in and help with the situation,” Courson explains. “I’m not sure that the district could have served in that role, to help both sides feel heard. K12 *Insight*, as an independent organization, was able to come in and do that for us.”

Education experts from K12 *Insight* formulated questions for the groups, hired interpreters to meet the needs of the school’s Spanish-speaking population, and produced a report analyzing the feedback from those conversations. The report explained the nature of each side’s concerns, clearly articulated where there were misunderstandings, and offered recommendations for how the district could manage its dual-language program more effectively.

The district shared the independent report with staff and parents and held a meeting at Blanco Vista to discuss next steps and diffuse concerns. In the wake of the controversy, the principal decided to resign and school officials used information from the community reports created by K12 *Insight* to identify a new principal.

“Checking the pulse of our community really helps us make better decisions and prioritize things in ways that are closer to home for our stakeholders,” says Courson.



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CHRISTINA COURSON
COMMUNICATIONS
SPECIALIST

THE FUTURE

These days, Courson says, the district continues to work with K12 *Insight* to improve community engagement and understand the needs of parents, staff and others.

“It’s not just the focus groups and the surveys,” says Courson. “It’s the professional recommendations that K12 *Insight* provides. It’s the research-based best practices: They’re able to provide a full menu of solutions. You can choose a la carte, or you can go for the whole menu. With Blanco Vista, for example, we went for the whole menu.”

She sums the relationship up this way: “We feel like we have a true partner in engagement and transparency. Certainly, the district is brainstorming solutions, but it’s nice to get feedback from somebody not too close to the issue.”



RESULTS

- 1 Improved planning and decision making that is more responsive to the community’s needs.
- 2 A better understanding of key concerns that could affect the district’s unity if not addressed.

Always-on listening.

The surveys Hays CISD conduct in partnership with K12 *Insight* help the district get a deeper understanding of the community’s challenges. But educators also need a way to engage community members in daily conversations.

The district launched Let’s Talk!, a cloud-based communications solution that enables school leaders to easily invite and respond to community feedback through a button on the district website.

Messages are routed through Let’s Talk! and immediately assigned to the the right staff member to ensure a timely and effective response.

The technology enables school district and board staff to more effectively address ongoing community concerns.

Board members have even begun to carry cards bearing Let’s Talk! QR codes, which they hand out in public to encourage more active community feedback.

For more ideas to engage your community, visit **Let’s Talk!** at www.k12insight.com/lets-talk

Let’s Talk!
from K12 *Insight* ▶

