

How Supports Higher Order Comprehension and Student Engagement in Reading

DISTRICT PROFILE

District

Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District (CFISD)

Location

Includes parts of Harris County, a small portion of Houston, and the city of Jersey Village, Texas

Number of Students

118,500+ Total

20,000+ using *Storyworks* across Grades 1–5

Number of Elementary Schools

58, with *Storyworks* in use in 100% of the elementary schools

Demographics

45% Hispanic, 20% White, 20% African American, 10% Asian

22,100+ Emergent Bilingual students

60% economically disadvantaged



THE CHALLENGE

More than a decade ago, the Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District (CFISD), in the Houston, Texas, metropolitan area, was searching for a supplemental reading program that could provide highly engaging texts for their elementary students, as they were not using a basal reading program. They sought texts that would entice their students during independent reading time. They were also looking for mentor texts—essential teaching texts that teachers could use to demonstrate specific reading or writing strategies—across multiple genres and writing styles for a variety of purposes related to literacy instruction.

THE SOLUTION

CFISD asked their corps of experienced model teachers to pilot test Scholastic's *Storyworks*® magazine, and then based on their feedback, selected it for use district-wide. The magazine had the variety of genres and text types the teachers would need for instruction. Jenifer Jones, language arts coordinator for elementary schools, appreciated that it included a teacher's guide and came with "activities that even my newer teachers could utilize." Most importantly, *Storyworks* featured quality texts that were highly engaging. Jones expected that students would love the magazines and have a desire to read. Accordingly, *Storyworks* was selected as one of several ELA supplemental programs. However, after an initial eight-year adoption and multiple renewals, Jones notes that *Storyworks* has "morphed into so much more than just a supplemental" to become an indispensable component of literacy instruction at CFISD elementary schools. And the district's literacy program has been highly effective, earning an "exemplary" academic accountability rating from the Texas Education Agency—the largest district in the state to earn this rating.

SUPPORTING TEACHERS IN THEIR USE OF *STORYWORKS*

Prior to the first semester of use, Scholastic team members introduced *Storyworks* to the teachers during the district's professional development week in August. Teachers had the opportunity to review the magazines, explore the stories, and ask the Scholastic team questions about their use. At that time, *Storyworks* was a print-based program, and the teachers were each given a binder with the teacher's guide and instructional activity resources.

Since the original rollout, *Storyworks* has evolved to a print and digital program, and district coaches and school instructional specialists have assumed responsibility for *Storyworks* professional development. The coaches and instructional specialists lead training sessions where they show teachers how to search for articles, access them digitally, and present them on the teachers' Promethean interactive display boards. In addition, they demonstrate how to launch the introductory videos included with *Storyworks*, designed to provide context and background knowledge. The training sessions also address use of various question types within *Storyworks* lesson plans, including guiding questions, multiple choice and short response items, and extended constructed response prompts. Language arts coordinator Jones further discussed ongoing training on how to use *Storyworks* articles in different ways, including small-group lessons, mini-lessons, and interactive use on computers and other digital devices.

During their regular meetings, the CFISD model teachers share ideas about what has worked especially well in their *Storyworks* lessons. Then "tips and tricks" arising from those discussions are shared with the other teachers.

At weekly grade level planning meetings at the elementary schools, teachers discuss the application of various instructional resources, and they frequently share their use of *Storyworks* articles for specific instructional purposes.

ADMINISTRATOR AND TEACHER REACTIONS TO *STORYWORKS*

According to language arts coordinator Jones, CFISD teachers are "in love with *Storyworks*, and that hasn't changed for over 10 years."

Teachers and school-level ELA instructional specialists agree that *Storyworks* is highly engaging for their students. Courtney Ducharme, a third-grade ELA teacher at Walker Elementary School, likes that it is a magazine for children and is colorful and "very visually pleasing to kids. It's much more interesting to look at than a regular online book." Bianca Esparza, a fifth-grade teacher at Matzke Elementary who teaches both bilingual and general education classes, finds that the *Storyworks* articles are engaging in the sense that students "see themselves reflected" in the stories.

Susan Bergholtz, the ELA instructional specialist at Matzke Elementary School and a former teacher in the district, likes the wide range of topics in the magazines, including both fiction and nonfiction. Ducharme appreciates the text and graphics features in the nonfiction articles. She also likes that it includes poetry, as she had been having a hard time finding examples of poetry appropriate for her students.

Kim Dameron, the principal at Walker, especially likes the online features, which include the introductory videos, slideshows with audio and visual support for building knowledge and vocabulary, the availability of the same story at multiple reading levels, the text-to-speech option, and interactive activities and lessons.

Cynthia Hancock, Walker's ELA instructional specialist and a former teacher in the district, likes that the stories can be used effectively with struggling, on-level, and high-performing readers.

IMPLEMENTING STORYWORKS

CFISD initially implemented *Storyworks* in Grades 4 and 5 and the district's use has increased over the years, next into Grade 3 with *Storyworks 3*, and finally to Grade 2 with *Storyworks 2*. The number of students using *Storyworks* in the district overall and within each elementary school has continued to grow. Since *Storyworks* became a hybrid print-and-digital program, teachers and instructional specialists at CFISD have been using the program in a variety of ways.

Sometimes it's used as the mentor text. For example, Ducharme presents a poem from a *Storyworks* magazine to her class on her Promethean interactive board. Then she and her students analyze the poem together and use the board's markup and annotation tools to identify stanzas, lines, and rhyming words. When they're done with the lesson, she prints out a copy for each student.

When teachers choose a mentor text from a different source, they often follow up by assigning a *Storyworks* article as the text for students to apply the reading or writing strategy independently. For example, Ducharme used a read-aloud from another source to lead a whole-group lesson on making inferences. "But then I don't want them using the same book that I use. I want them to apply it independently. So I picked a biography in *Storyworks*, and they had to make inferences using that biography" and identify text evidence for each inference.

Teachers and instructional specialists identified several other literacy skills and strategies for which *Storyworks* texts and supporting resources have worked especially well, including summarization (using a *Storyworks* graphic organizer), conducting research from informational texts, writing argumentative essays (using a *Storyworks* debate article as a model), and identification of nonfiction graphics features and text features. Esparza notes that the magazines can be used for every skill she wants to teach because of the variety of text types. Besides poetry and biographies mentioned previously, *Storyworks* text types include news articles, informational texts, fiction, and plays.

In addition to use for whole-class lessons and individual, independent work, CFISD teachers and instructional specialists make frequent use of *Storyworks* articles as mentor texts for small-group instruction, with interventionists working with Tier 3 students in need of intensive support and with tutors supporting "bubble" students who are almost on level.

At Matzke Elementary School, they also use *Storyworks* articles in their Saturday and after-school camps for striving learners who need extra help. Teachers volunteer their time, and instructional specialist Bergholtz selects a *Storyworks* article appropriate for teaching a specific skill and prepares a set of tailored prompts and questions for the teachers, adapted from the instructional resources provided with *Storyworks*. Question types might include multiple choice, short response, and extended, constructed response.

Teachers also make *Storyworks* available as a choice for independent reading. For example, at Walker Elementary School, they schedule 30 minutes of independent reading time every day. Sometimes Ducharme gives students completely free choice of what to read. Other times, she narrows the choice based on the instructional focus of the day, sometimes a fiction choice, sometimes nonfiction.

At Matzke Elementary, they also send *Storyworks* home with students to engage parents in reading with their children.

Teachers and instructional specialists take advantage of several of the *Storyworks* digital features. They use the introductory videos, which not only build background knowledge, but also provide listening practice, and speaking practice during follow-up discussion. This has proven especially valuable for English language learners. The staff also makes use of the slideshows, the texts available

at multiple reading levels, and the text-to-speech option, which works well with Esparza's bilingual and special ed students. The *Storyworks* activity sheets and quizzes are also in regular use.

OUTCOMES FROM IMPLEMENTING STORYWORKS

Currently, Cypress-Fairbanks is the largest district in the state to earn an A (exemplary) accountability rating from the Texas Education Agency, which considers student achievement, academic progress, and closing the gap for different demographic groups. According to Jones, *Storyworks* has contributed to the district's academic success. She explained that the Texas state reading/ELA assessment (STAAR) is multigenre, and *Storyworks* provides lots of high-quality reading experiences across different genres, and it includes support resources with rigorous questioning that address higher order comprehension.

Walker elementary school's ELA instructional specialist, Hancock, finds that *Storyworks* contributes to vocabulary development. Matzke's ELA instructional specialist, Bergholtz, sees *Storyworks* as helping to improve students' writing ability because of the frequent extended constructed response prompts.

Teachers and administrators agree that using *Storyworks* has increased students' engagement with and excitement about reading, helping to develop lifelong readers.

At the conclusion of her interview, Walker principal Dameron expressed her strong feelings about *Storyworks*. "We love it. We definitely utilize it. We don't ever want it to leave."

