CASE STUDY

Houston Independent School District

unique® learning system

n2y®

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Overview

The Houston Independent School District (HISD) is the largest school district in Texas, and the seventh largest in the United States, serving approximately 215,000 students in 287 schools. Of the total student population, 75.5 percent are economically disadvantaged and speak approximately 100 different languages.

HISD needed a curriculum to meet the needs of students with the most significant disabilities. However, with 375 special education classrooms, finding the right program was an overwhelming task. Special education teachers were utilizing a basic transitional program and piecing together any instructional materials they could build on their own. They needed a comprehensive, standards-based, grade-level curriculum that aligned with the state's Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), and supported an alternate assessment, the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness-Alternate 2 (STAAR® Alternate 2).

Embarking On Change

HISD embarked on a two-year journey to find and implement the right curriculum to meet these goals. In the summer of 2013, the Office of Special Education Services invited teachers of students with significant disabilities—including autism, significant cognitive impairment, substantial sensory-based deficits, and medically fragile conditions—to preview seven different curriculums and curricula pieces. Included in their preview was Unique Learning System® from n2y, a standards-based curriculum that aligns with both TEKS and the STAAR Alternate assessment for preschool through 12th grade. Unique Learning System also provides age-respectful and grade-level appropriate content, differentiated for personalized learning and access needs. The teachers chose Unique Learning System as the curriculum to pilot for the coming school year, utilizing all grade bands and all core subjects.

Unique Learning System is a dynamic, standards-based online curriculum designed to provide students with moderate to severe disabilities comprehensive access to the general education curriculum. Unique Learning System provides teachers and related service staff with lesson plans and support using best practices in teaching to ensure high quality instruction.

Unique Learning System provides visual supports and communication assistance using symbols from n2y's own SymbolStix PRIME®, which features a database of nearly

92,000 symbol options with changeable skin tones to depict people, events and activities. The unit lesson plans define three levels of differentiated tasks to accommodate a diversity of learners with significant disabilities. The Unique Learning System GPS (Goals, Preferences and Skills) offers assessments that enable data-driven instruction by tracking student, classroom and program goals, as well as student growth and progress.

Process

STEP 1
Implementation

In Year 1, the pilot year, HISD provided the Unique Learning System curriculum to teachers as a tool and not a mandated curriculum.

In Year 2, Unique Learning System was mandated as the curriculum of choice in every classroom serving students with significant cognitive disabilities, and a plan was put in place outlining expectations, deadlines, support and training. The district's Unique All-Star Team of program specialists and experienced teachers collaborated with n2y to implement Unique Learning System successfully. Here's how they succeeded.

UNIQUE LEARNING SYSTEM IS A MANDATED CURRICULUM

In 2014, HISD mandated district-wide implementation of Unique Learning System.

IMPLEMENTATION SUPPORT

HISD was dedicated to the proper implementation of Unique Learning System. With the help of the n2y Professional Development team, each teacher was provided with a full day of training to implement Unique Learning System and all of its curricula and data tools into their classrooms. Today, this Unique Learning System initial training is required for all first-year teachers, while Unique Learning System refresher training is optional for veteran teachers in the district. If a teacher needs additional coaching, it can be recommended and/or mandated by campus administration.

WEEKLY AND MONTHLY SUPPORT MEETINGS

Professional Learning Communities were established for the Unique Learning System teachers to address any needed technology assistance or instructional guidance. Today, teachers can still attend monthly *Technology Tuesdays* to get technology questions answered for their classrooms. *Thursday Think Tanks* also occur monthly, and allow teachers using Unique Learning System to network with their peers or program specialists to develop new educational skills.

VISITS FROM THE UNIQUE ALL-STAR TEAM

The Unique All-Star Team was developed to provide resources and support for teachers. It is comprised of five program specialists and four experienced teachers who conduct classroom observations and help support teachers' educational needs. This team has been vital in helping struggling teachers, and supporting the implementation of Unique Learning System and data collection.

ANNUAL TEACHER SURVEY

At the end of every school year, the HISD Office of Special Education generates a Unique Learning System Survey to collect feedback from teachers and conduct a needs assessment for the following year. Teacher feedback drives the next year's Unique Learning System professional development training. Feedback contributes to both Unique Learning System initial training and Unique Learning System refresher training, which also incorporates new curriculum features coming to Unique Learning System in the fall. Both training programs are offered in conjunction with n2y.

STEP 2

Evaluate, Modify and Change (Tips and Tricks)

The Unique All-Star Team evaluates and reevaluates the effectiveness of the curriculum on an ongoing basis. This allows them to address teachers' needs and adjust the implementation in real time. HISD notes the following key lessons learned since the initial implementation of Unique Learning System in 2014:

MANDATE THE CURRICULUM

Mandating Unique Learning System and its necessary supports encourages everyone to embrace the decision and move the adoption forward.

COMMUNICATION IS KEY!

Constant contact with teachers, parents and administrators is critical when it comes to implementing or modifying the curricula choice. It is HISD's belief that clear communication up and down the ladder is crucial to student growth.

Expect Frustrations

Hurdles are a fact of life with the rollout of any major initiative. When teachers of students with significant disabilities have not previously utilized a comprehensive curriculum with a data tool in their classroom, some bumps should be expected in the district-wide implementation process.

Data Is Key!

HISD utilizes the Unique Learning System GPS assessment tool that tracks progress toward IEP goals and grade-level academic skills through monthly checkpoints, benchmark assessments, daily performance and more. Unique Learning System also provides administrators with access to class or individual student data which can be used to identify staff support needs.

Offer Varied Support Systems For Educators

Professional learning communities, forums, teacher mentoring options and classroom walk-throughs and observation help support the implementation and ongoing learning of educators.

Summary

HISD has found the Unique Learning System curriculum to be a much-needed resource for successfully meeting the instructional needs of students with significant disabilities. The district anticipated there would be hurdles such as training, teacher turnover and logistics that come with any large-scale change. The successful rollout of a mandated, district-wide alternate curriculum provided HISD with the instructional change it desired.

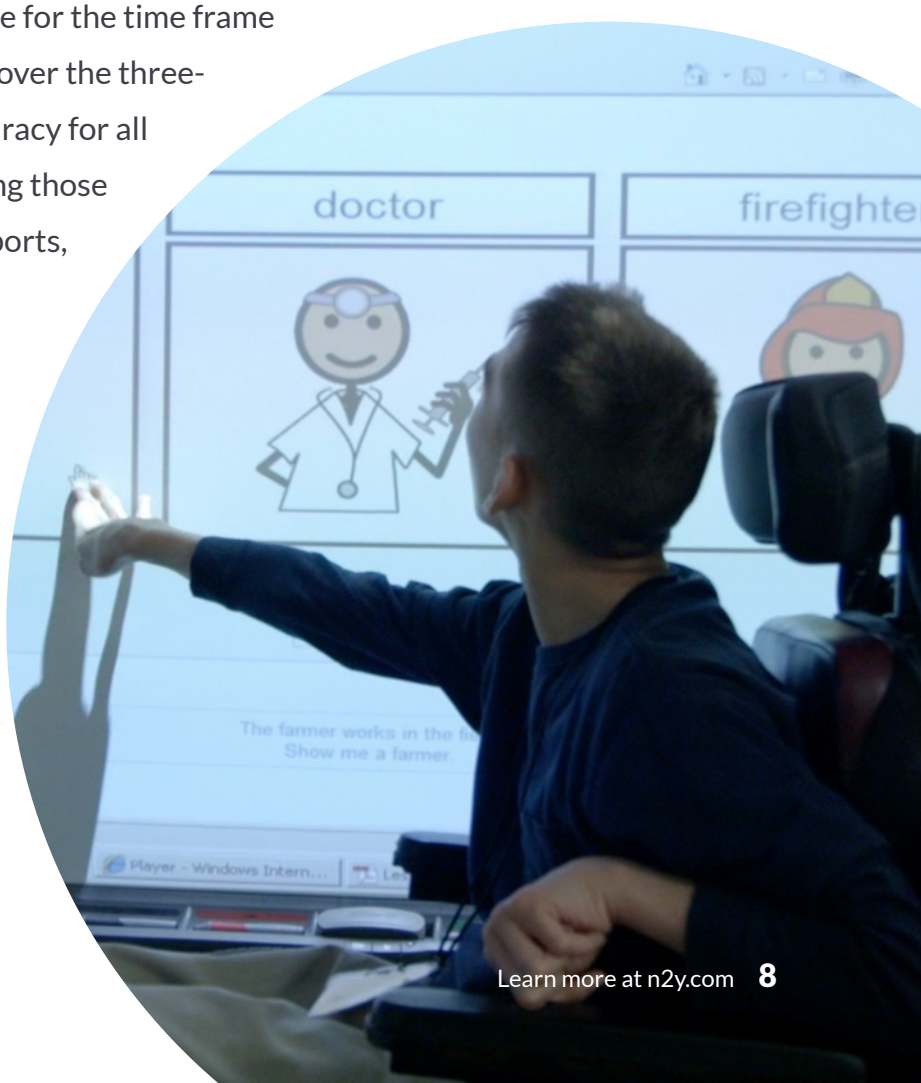
The district has employed and trained strong educators, today totaling 385, and implemented strategic planning to meet the challenges that came with this necessary, large-scale curriculum change. By utilizing Unique Learning System, HISD and n2y have collaboratively built a successful program, resulting in teachers who are more skilled in classroom-based instruction and students who feel more supported and independent.

For HISD, the implementation of Unique Learning System has delivered a positive effect on both student growth and teacher satisfaction. This HISD case study has been made available to other school districts interested in learning more about its journey.

2017 Update

The ultimate goal of the Unique Learning System curriculum is to have a positive effect on student outcomes and achievements. Test scores in HISD show this desired result is being met.

After implementing the Unique Learning System curriculum, the district used monthly Post-Test Checkpoint scores from the 2013–2016 school years to determine students' levels of growth. Checkpoint assessments are administered at the beginning and end of each month to measure students' level of knowledge before and after instruction within pre-identified skills in ELA and Math. The sample size includes all students in HISD with a Post-Test Checkpoint score for the time frame and grade selected. With average scores over the three-year period indicating an increase in accuracy for all groups of special needs students, including those requiring the most intensive Level 1 Supports, implementation of the Unique Learning System curriculum has been deemed a success for HISD.



Enhancing Student Achievement

Unique Learning System is used to provide students with moderate to severe disabilities comprehensive access to the general education curriculum.

- Aligned to Texas State Standards for ELA, Math, Science and Social Studies for preschool through 12th grade
- Provides age-respectful and grade-level appropriate content, differentiated for personalized learning and access needs
- Provides teachers and related service staff with lesson plans and support using best practices in teaching to ensure high quality instruction

Improving Student Outcomes

Unique Learning System assessments are used to monitor student achievement.

- Track progress toward IEP goals and grade-level academic skills through monthly checkpoints, benchmark assessments, daily performance and more
- Provide administrator with access to class or individual student data which can be used to identify staff support needs

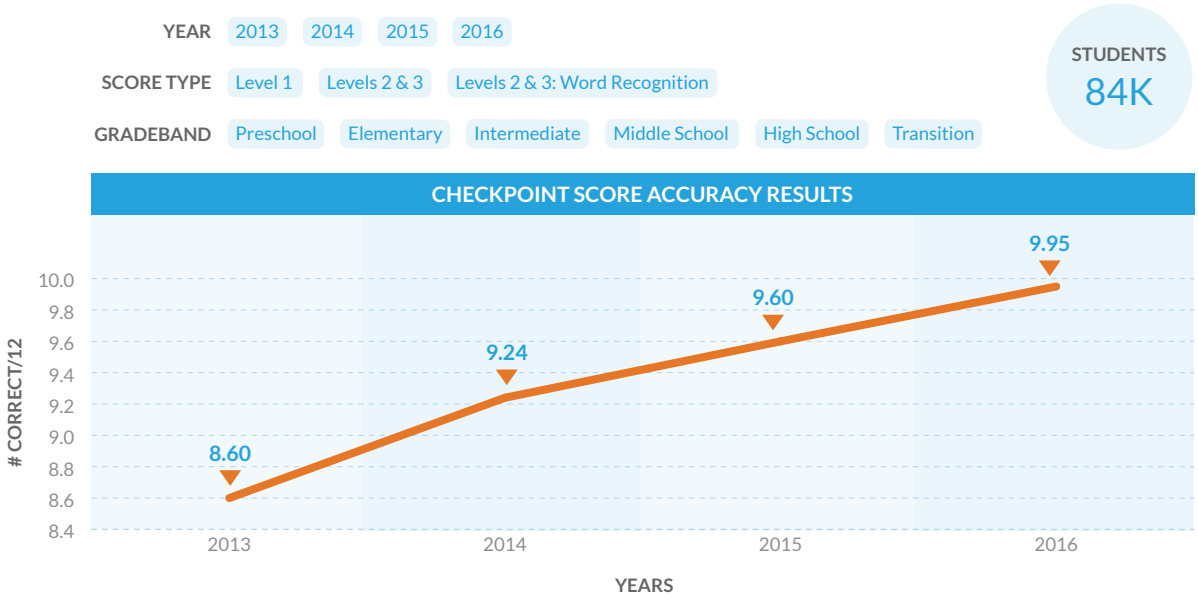
Demonstrated Growth by HISD Students

To determine growth, the following data and filters were used:

- Monthly Post-Test Checkpoint scores* from 2013–2016 school years
- Sample Size: All students in HISD that have a Post-Test Checkpoint score for the time frame and grade selected

OVERALL

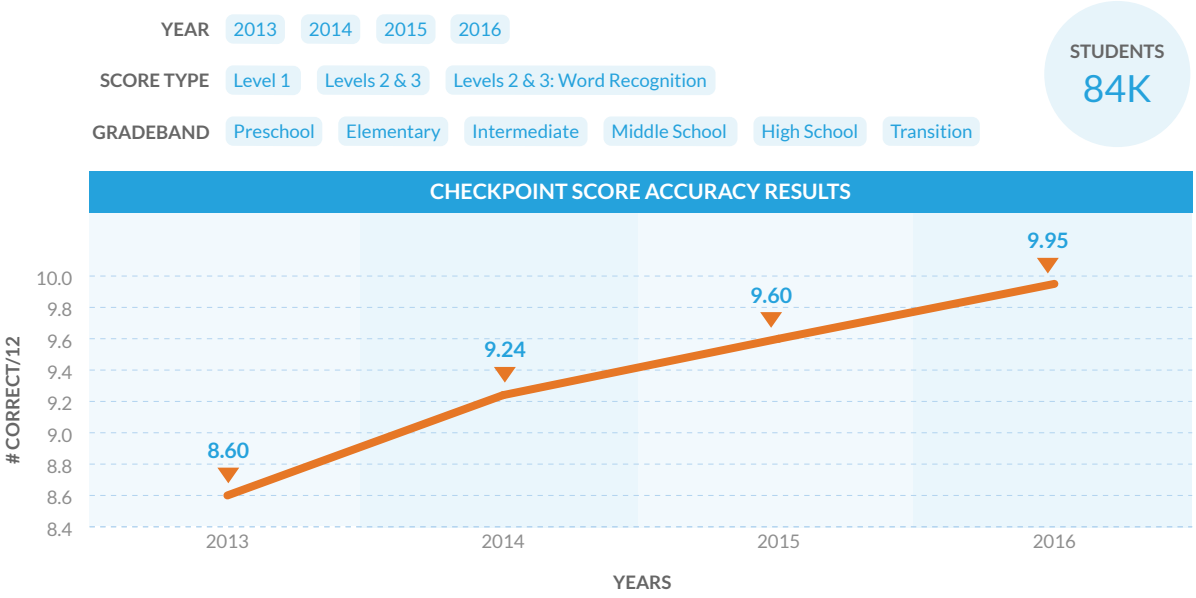
Average Post-Test Checkpoint scores indicate an **overall 11.3% increase in accuracy**.



* Checkpoint Assessments are administered at the beginning and end of each month. They assess a consistent set of pre-identified skills in ELA and Math. Checkpoints measure what students know before and after instruction.

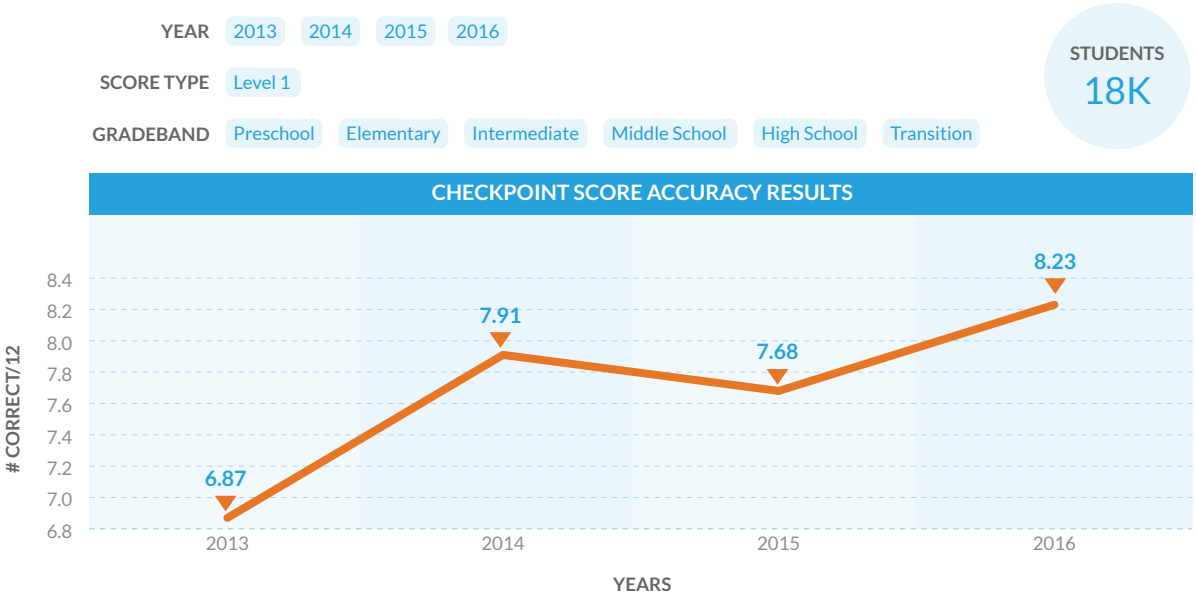
LEVEL 2 OR 3 SUPPORTS

Average Post-Test Checkpoint scores indicate a
11.3% increase in accuracy for students requiring Level 2 or 3 Supports.



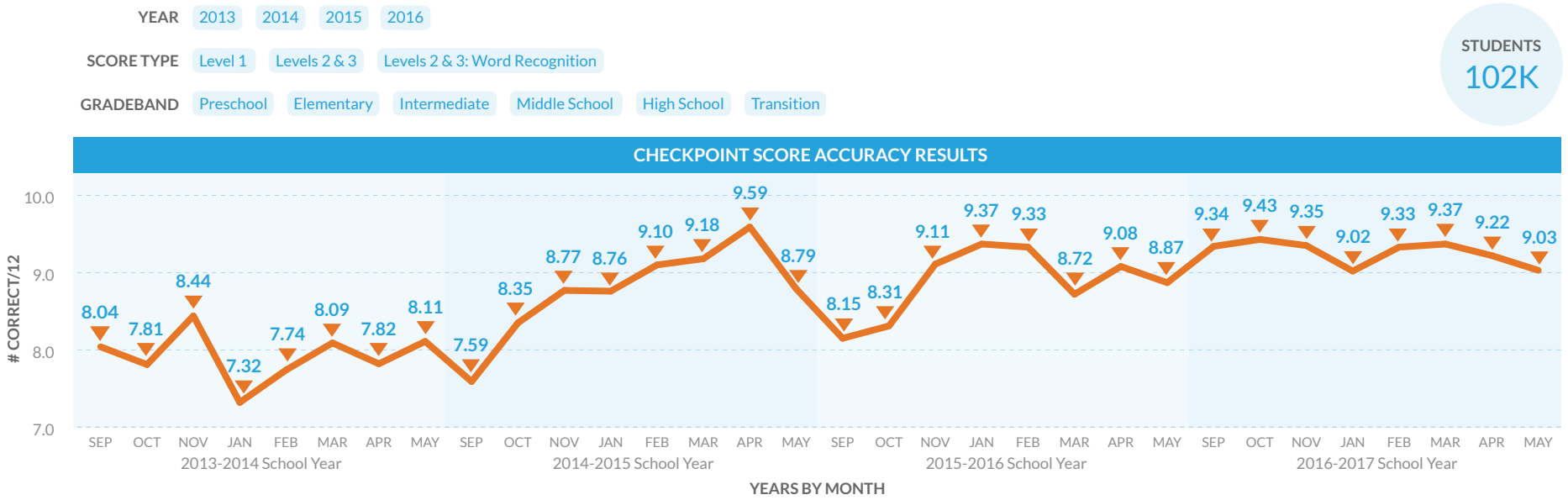
LEVEL 1 SUPPORTS

Average Post-Test Checkpoint scores indicate an
11.4% increase in accuracy for students requiring **Level 1 Supports**
(most intensive supports).



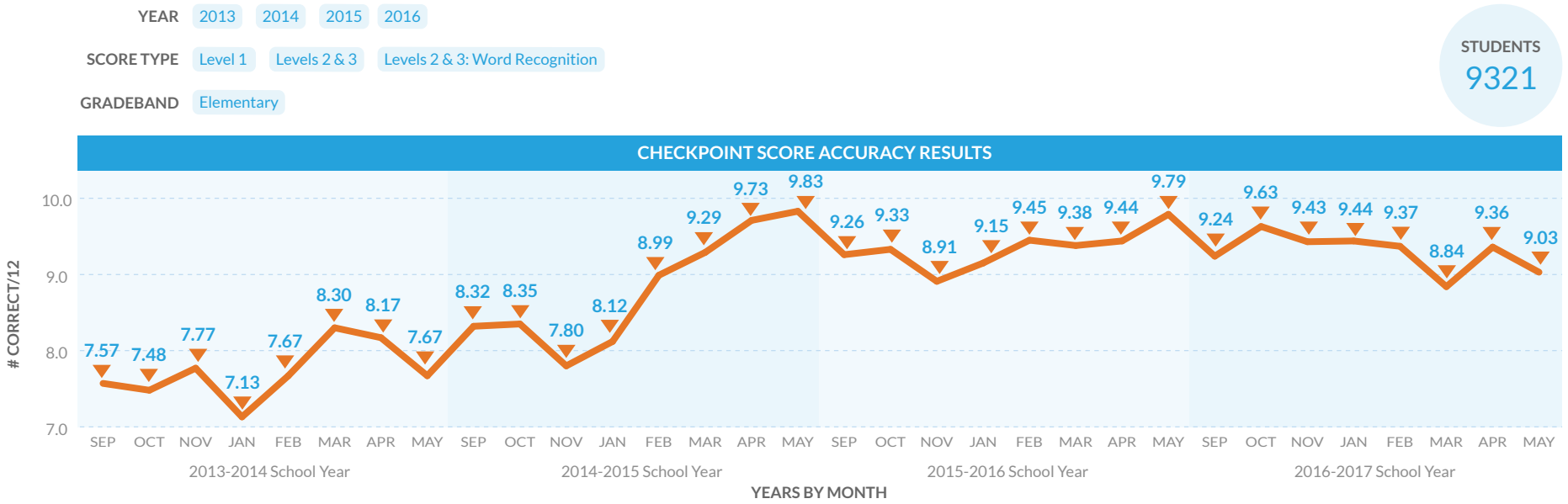
YEAR-OVER-YEAR COMPARISON

- Students begin each school year with higher average Post-Test Checkpoint scores than the previous year.
- A small yearly dip in scores is present and corresponds to the winter holidays.
- Students end each year with higher average Post-Test Checkpoint scores than the previous year.



YEAR-OVER-YEAR ELEMENTARY GRADE BAND (K–2)

Overall **35.4% increase** in accuracy



YEAR-OVER-YEAR INTERMEDIATE GRADE BAND (3–5)

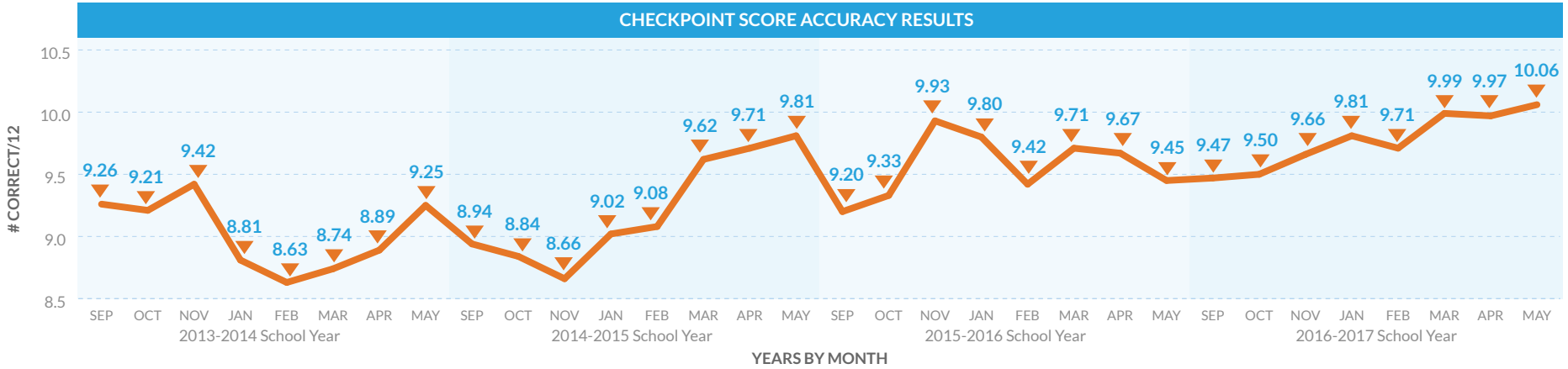
Overall **6.2% increase** in accuracy

YEAR 2013 2014 2015 2016

SCORE TYPE Level 1 Levels 2 & 3 Levels 2 & 3: Word Recognition

GRADEBAND Intermediate

STUDENTS 31K



YEAR-OVER-YEAR MIDDLE SCHOOL BAND (6–8)

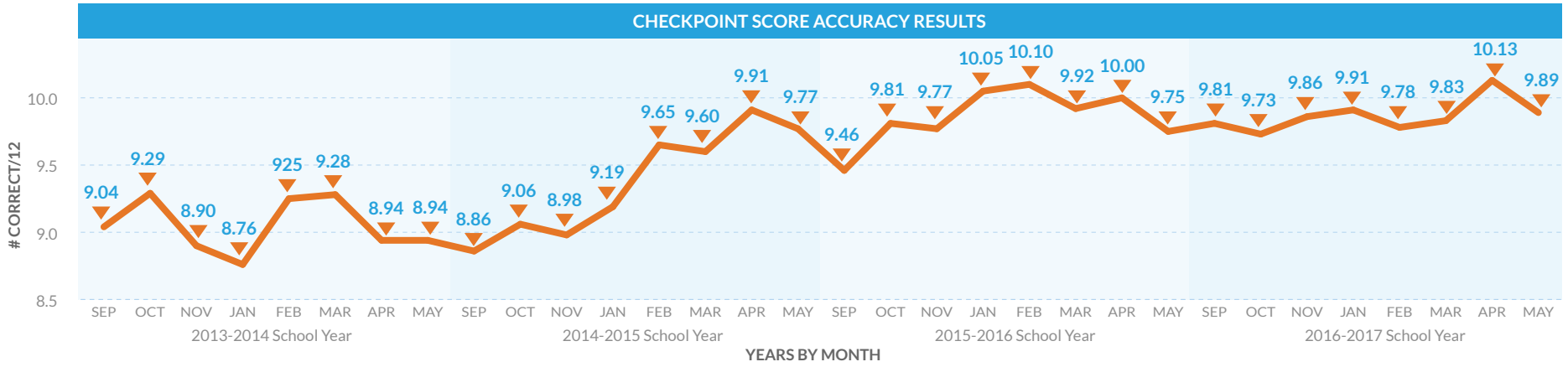
Overall **9.1% increase** in accuracy

YEAR 2013 2014 2015 2016

SCORE TYPE Level 1 Levels 2 & 3 Levels 2 & 3: Word Recognition

GRADEBAND Middle School

STUDENTS 29K



YEAR-OVER-YEAR HIGH SCHOOL GRADE BAND (9–12)

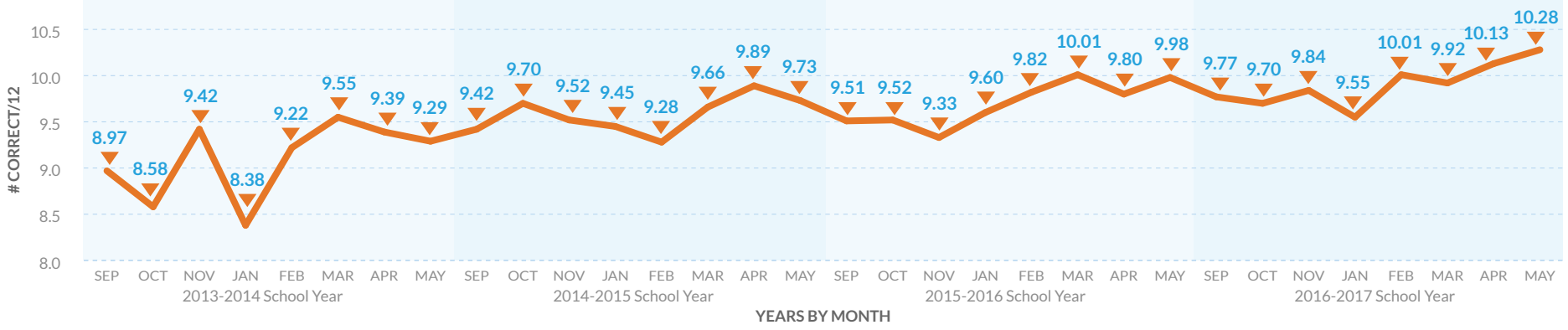
Overall **10.9% increase** in accuracy

YEAR 2013 2014 2015 2016

SCORE TYPE Level 1 Levels 2 & 3 Levels 2 & 3: Word Recognition

GRADEBAND High School

STUDENTS 31K



YEAR-OVER-YEAR TRANSITION GRADE BAND

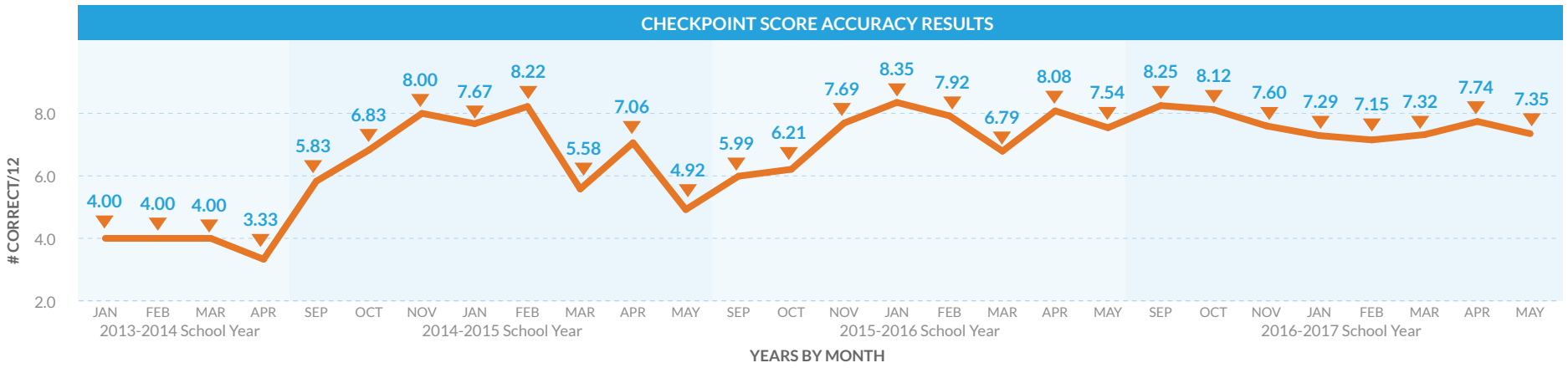
Overall **36.3% increase** in accuracy

YEAR 2013 2014 2015 2016

SCORE TYPE Level 1 Levels 2 & 3

GRADEBAND Transition

STUDENTS 1751



HISD Success

After a successful implementation of Unique Learning System in 2014, HISD saw a continual increase in *Texas STAAR Alternate Assessments* scores for both Reading and Math. Over a three-year period, more students moved from the Developing performance level into Satisfactory and Accomplished levels.

THIRD GRADE PERFORMANCE*

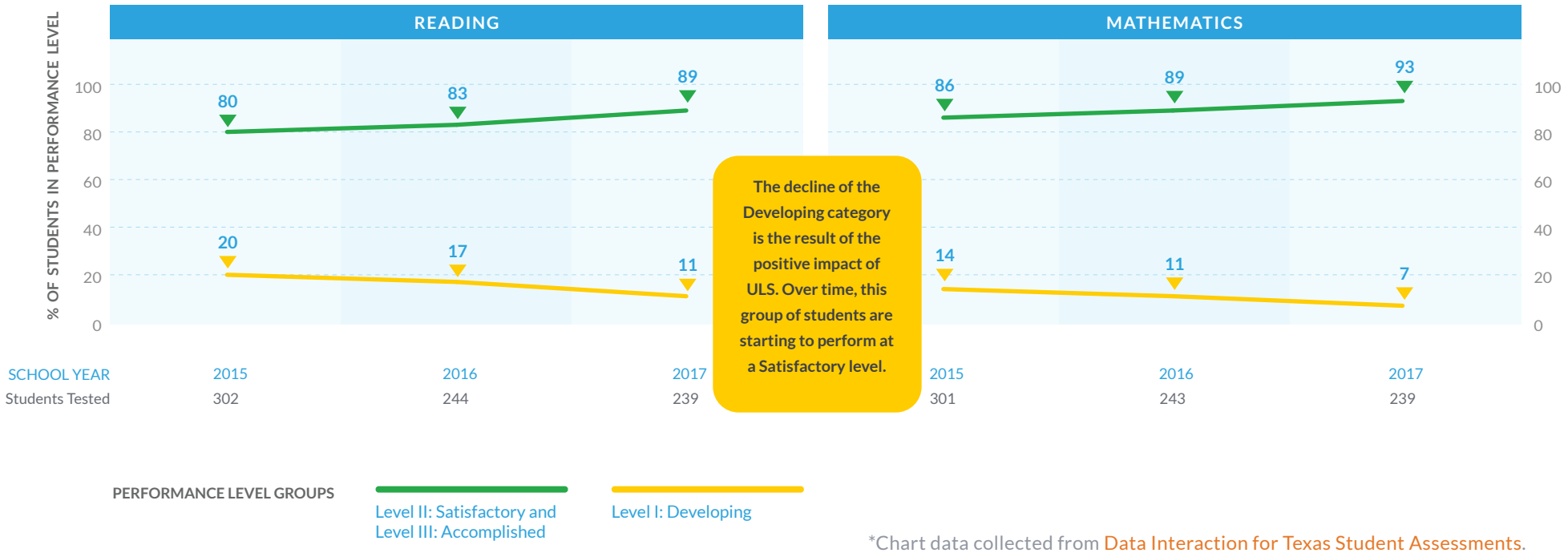


*Chart data collected from Data Interaction for Texas Student Assessments.

FOURTH GRADE PERFORMANCE*

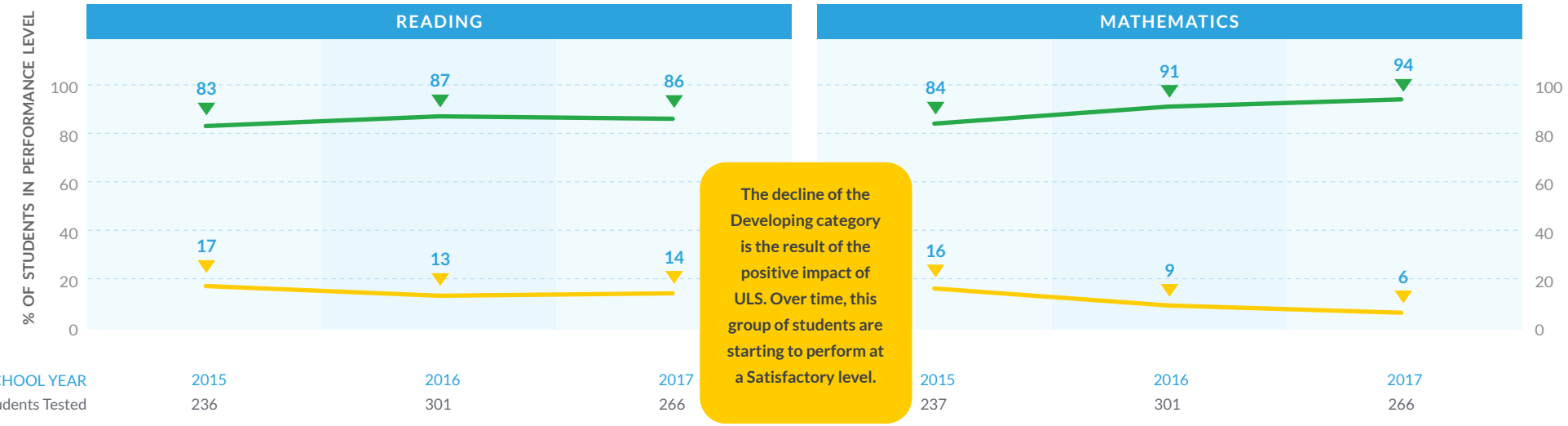


*Chart data collected from Data Interaction for Texas Student Assessments.

FIFTH GRADE PERFORMANCE*

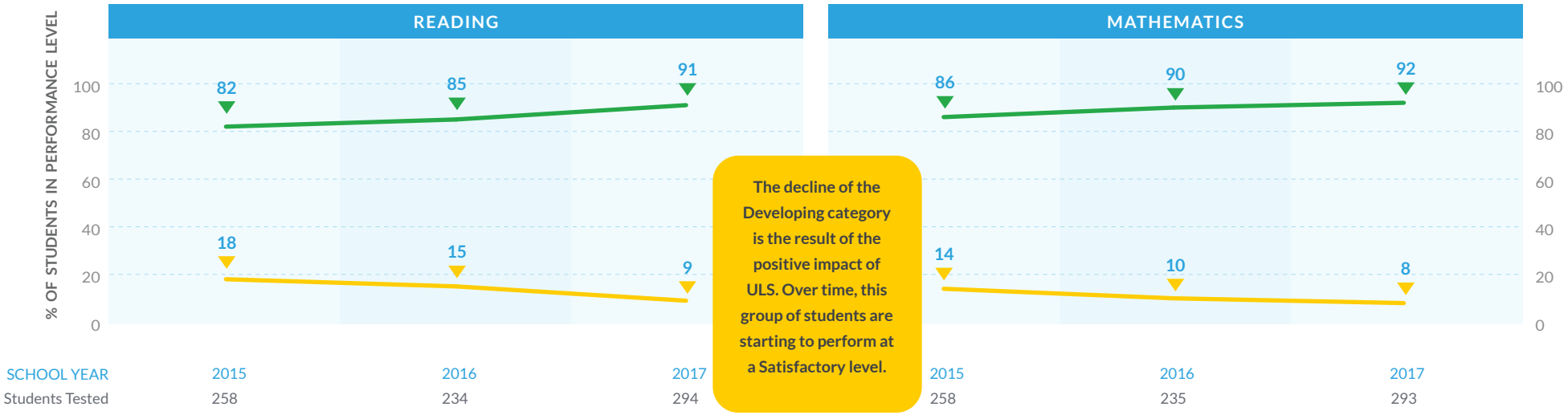
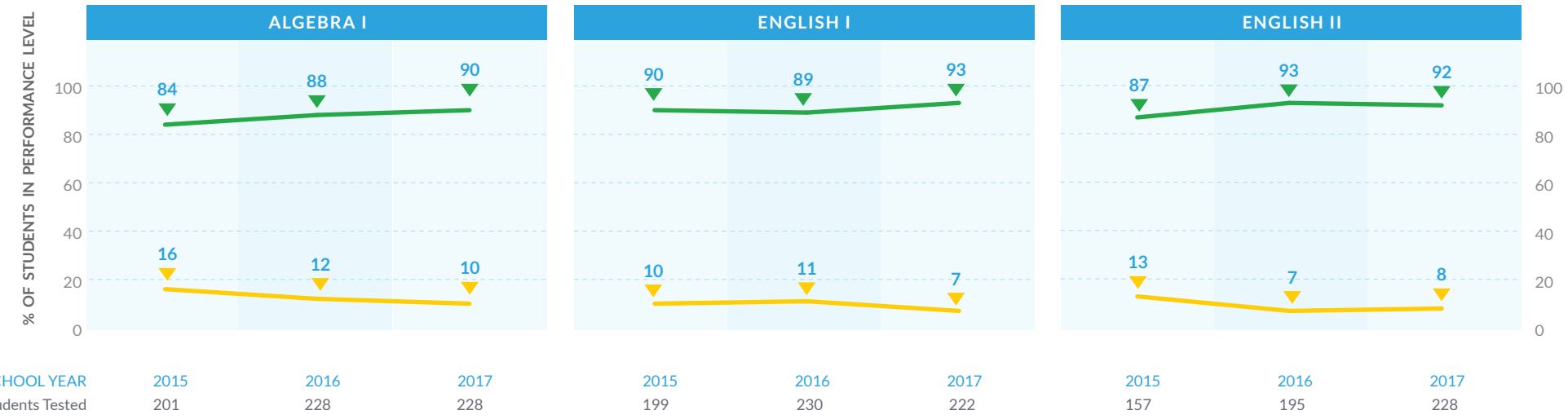


*Chart data collected from Data Interaction for Texas Student Assessments.

HIGH SCHOOL PERFORMANCE*

After a successful implementation of Unique Learning System in 2014, Houston Independent School District (HISD) saw a continual increase in student *Texas STAAR End of Course (EOC) High School Alternate Assessments* scores for Algebra and English. Over a three-year period, more students moved from the Developing performance level into Satisfactory and Accomplished levels.



The decline of the Developing category is the result of the positive impact of ULS. Over time, this group of students are starting to perform at a Satisfactory level.

*Chart data collected from Data Interaction for Texas Student Assessments.

UNDERSTANDING THE ASSESSMENT

Texas STAAR Alternate 2 is an assessment based on alternate academic achievement standards. STAAR Alternate 2 is designed for students with significant cognitive disabilities served by special education who meet the participation requirements. Students who meet the participation criteria for STAAR Alternate 2 are required to be assessed in each enrolled grade or subject in which STAAR is administered. The assessment consists of scripted questions aligned to the grade-level TEKS curriculum through prerequisite skills. The test administrator scores each question using scoring instructions and submits results through an online system.

Level III: Accomplished Academic Performance

Performance in this category indicates that students are well prepared for the next grade or course with instructional supports for accessing the curriculum through prerequisite skills. Students demonstrate a strong understanding of the knowledge and skills that are linked to content measured at the grade or course assessed. Students exhibit the ability to use higher-level thinking and more complex skills, including making inferences, comparisons, and solving multi-step problems. With support, students in this category have a high likelihood of showing progress in the next grade or course.

Level II: Satisfactory Academic Performance

Performance in this category indicates that students are sufficiently prepared for the next grade or course with instructional supports for accessing the curriculum

through prerequisite skills. Students demonstrate sufficient understanding of the knowledge and skills that are linked to content measured at the grade or course assessed. Students exhibit the ability to determine relationships, integrate multiple pieces of information, extend details, identify concepts, and match concepts that are similar. With continued support, students in this category have a reasonable likelihood of showing progress in the next grade or course.

Level I: Developing Academic Performance

Performance in this category indicates that students require additional instructional supports for accessing the curriculum through prerequisite skills. Students are able to acknowledge some concepts, but they demonstrate a minimal or inconsistent understanding of the knowledge and skills that are linked to content measured in this grade or course. Even with continued support, students in this category are in need of significant intervention to show progress in the next grade or course.

ABOUT N2Y

n2y is a software as a service company located in Huron, Ohio that is changing the way special education is taught by enabling students with special needs to access the general education curriculum. Offering special education software solutions, lesson plans and tools for teachers, administrators, speech-language pathologists, parents and other educational team members, n2y enables students with special needs to learn through engagement.

NEXT STEPS...

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See for yourself with a live demo why educators across the country rely on n2y's products and vision to elevate the quality of education for students with special needs.

SCHEDULE A DEMO

EVERYONE Can Learn™

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