

Alamo Heights Junior School, AHISD
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Alamo Heights Junior School Transforming Learning Through Vulnerability

At Alamo Heights Junior School, we transform learning through a common vision of innovation and embracing stakeholders' strengths. Our 6th through 8th grade school of 1150 students thrives because of the intentionality and support of our district leadership. We engage in constant reflection to meet the unique needs of our students. Our goal is that they leave us inspired and empowered to make a difference in the world.

Guided by the district's intentional and carefully developed Profile of a Learner, we embrace the digital revolution and design lessons that prepare our students for the 'real world'. The Visioning Document articles of Organizational Transformation and The New Learning Standards further give us focus items for reflection, which leads to initiatives and experiences that make our school a place where students are happy and feel their voices are valued.

Organizational Transformation

At Alamo Heights Junior School, we believe that through collaboration we can transform learning to meet the expectations of new learning standards. The "Pineapple Project" in particular has been the centerpiece of a campus designed professional development plan for teachers on our campus. Beginning with the premise that teachers teaching teachers is an ideal way to engage in constructive, useful PD that is relevant to our unique campus needs and goals, we have preached vulnerability (and all that it entails) as teachers have been encouraged to open their classrooms to other teachers in an attempt to learn from each other. Science teachers are not only learning from their fellow science teachers, and math teachers from their fellow math teachers, but they are also encouraged to step outside of their comfort zones and areas of expertise and visit a teacher in another content area. After each visit, feedback, questions and general notes on observations are given to promote a dialogue among and between teachers on the campus. Teachers' areas of strength are identified and noted to identify them as experts at that "skill" so that other teachers can go to them for help, if needed.

We have currently entered phase 2 of the Pineapple Project, where teachers are now encouraged to visit a classroom in another content area that shares a common student. This is to experience the school day from a student's perspective and see how students interact with other teachers and classmates. This explicit promotion of vulnerability in its many forms has allowed teachers and administrators to honestly assess their practices with the goal towards improving the organization from multiple perspectives. These perspectives are used in an attempt to actively take creative risks on a yearly basis to improve the educational experience for all Junior School

stakeholders, moving away from a teacher-led platform to a student engagement platform.

The New Learning Standards

We live in an age where students no longer need to sit through a lesson and then answer questions on a worksheet. We know we must prepare our students to be amazing communicators and critical thinkers to be successful in a global and quickly-changing world. Through different programs and initiatives, such as FLEX, STEM, Writers' Workshop, peer tutoring and the Dual Language program, we give opportunities for students to express their individuality and have a voice.

Our teachers come to us with unique interests and strengths, and they get to share those with students during our FLEX courses. Our students choose how they get to spend 35 minutes of the day with a teacher-proposed, student-inspired course, such as *Crocheting*, *Garageband*, *History Through Film*, *Harry Potter Club*, *Science Olympiad*, *Meaningful Documentaries*, and even this year's wildly successful production of *The Wizard of Oz* musical.

Through these options, students' multiple intelligences are celebrated and the whole child is developed. Our STEM program engages students in solving problems that impact the community, the world. Students are not given projects, but rather faced with questions and given the time and flexibility to create their own solutions. In Writers' Workshop, students are not just responding to a prompt or finishing an assignment, but rather are offered opportunities to grow as writers. Teachers act as facilitators to help students find their voice and to utilize writing as a method to communicate what is important to them. In Peer Tutoring, students act as teacher aides in the special needs classroom, supporting academics and social/emotional development. It is heart-warming to see how much students enjoy working together and the lessons in empathy and service that this course offers.

One more example of the ways in which we are ensuring our students are prepared for a more global community is through our Dual Language/Spanish Immersion program. About 300 of our students take 2 or 3 courses in Spanish each year, including content classes like Science and Social Studies, with the focus of building bilingual and culturally aware graduates.

In adhering to our *Profile of a Learner*, and the idea that being vulnerable means being open to looking at challenges as opportunities for growth, The Junior School has acknowledged that success can be measured in multiple ways and is not simply a number on a test score. Acknowledging that learning is not merely a linear development of skill sets, but also a matter of psychological engagement with the world around us, we here at the Junior School believe that fostering a student's love of chess, and playing the ukulele, or even playing a small role in helping to develop the next great documentarian is just as important, if not more important, than fostering and developing a student's ability to write a 26-line essay for the State of Texas. It is this dedication to these principles that allows Alamo Heights Junior School to be at the forefront of schools that are transforming learning every day.