

District Spotlight: Dr. Joseph Villarreal of Harlingen CISD, on Using SIPPS in Grades 6–12

By Dawn Castilleja | Categories: Educator Spotlight, Reading Intervention and Acceleration



Dr. Joseph Villarreal

How does SIPPS (Systematic Instruction in Phonological Awareness, Phonics, and Sight Words) address the needs of students in grades 6–12 who are striving readers?

In this spotlight, we hear from a Texas district that is using SIPPS on all of their secondary-school campuses. We're honored to feature Dr. Joseph Villarreal, Assistant Superintendent for Secondary Education for Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District (HCISD) in Harlingen, Texas, alongside two of his colleagues, Harlingen High School Assistant Principal Patricia Muniz, and Harlingen High School teacher Lorena Azua-Amaro.

Dr. Villarreal, thank you for speaking with us. Could you tell us a little about Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District (HCISD) and the students that you serve?

JV: The Harlingen Consolidated Independent School District is located in deep South Texas near the US/Mexico border. The school district serves 18,000 students, of which 80 percent are economically disadvantaged and 14 percent are English language learners.

How did the district become interested in SIPPS?

JV: HCISD learned about the SIPPS program through a meeting with Dawn Castilleja from the Center for Collaborative Classroom. HCISD wanted a program that addresses the needs of our secondary-school students who struggle to read.

How long has HCISD been implementing SIPPS? Tell us a little about the implementation. What data can you share with us?

JV: HCISD has just completed its second year with the SIPPS program. During the first year, the program was implemented at its two comprehensive high schools. Because of its success, the program was expanded to all secondary campuses.

In Texas, English language learners take the Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS) exam, which measures a student's level of English language acquisition. Of the HCISD English language learners that participated in the SIPPS program, every first-year student scored above the "Beginner" level, and 80 percent of other English language learners increased in at least one proficiency level from the prior year.

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Dr. Villarreal, at this time SIPPS has been expanded to all HCISD secondary schools. As you build on the district’s SIPPS implementation, what comes next?

JV: For the upcoming 2021–22 school year, HCISD will be implementing a district-wide Professional Learning Community to ensure implementation fidelity and implement a district-wide monitoring system.

In the next section of this interview, we hear from Harlingen High School’s Assistant Principal Patricia Muniz and SIPPS teacher Lorena Azua-Amaro, also of Harlingen High School.

What do you appreciate about the *SIPPS* program?

PM: *SIPPS* provides individualized instruction based on the student’s reading level. This allows the teacher to deliver the reading lessons to the students, who are grouped by their reading levels.

LAA: As a teacher, I appreciate that the *SIPPS* program addresses the basic phonological sounds in words and polysyllabic sounds in challenging words for students in high school. The curriculum provides everything, along with continued professional development offered throughout the year.

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What have you noticed about students’ learning and engagement since they started *SIPPS* [small-group] instruction?

LAA: The students are more engaged than in a regular classroom setting because they are with others who are at their same reading level. They are not as reluctant to take risks as they read and are open to feedback from the teacher.

I have noticed that students in the small-group setting tend to be more confident when re-learning the rules for reading words and practicing their fluency. Students participate in activities and are more engaged in class discussions.

How has *SIPPS* promoted student reading achievement? Do you have data you can share?

PM: *SIPPS* allows the student to be more confident when reading out loud and recognizing familiar words learned through the program. Several ESL students who participated in the *SIPPS* program last year, prior to the pandemic, showed progress in their TELPAS scores.

What thoughts or insights would you share with a district that is considering *SIPPS*?

LAA: I encourage school districts to try the program with students who are struggling readers. *SIPPS* is designed to address basic rules for reading and writing that students might have missed throughout their academic career. The curriculum provides everything you need, including a teacher’s manual, practice worksheets, flashcards and stories to read. All of this is now available online for students learning remotely.

SIPPS has been a great program to implement with high-school students in a small group setting where students grow confident in reading, speaking and learning words. *SIPPS* provides great strategies that will give students the confidence to enjoy reading in a safe environment.

