CogAT® Case Study:
A playbook for advancing equity and inclusion in gifted programs

CogAT®

Executive Summary

Richardson Independent School District - the second most diverse district in greater Dallas/Fort Worth metro area - needed a tool for universal screening and to measure each student's reasoning ability and potential for learning. Since selecting the Cognitive Abilities Test™ (*CogAT*) nine years ago, Richardson ISD has not only transformed its identification process to be more equitable and inclusive through the use of universalscreening and local norms, it has also increased the number of 2nd-grade students identified by nearly tenfold at one Title I campus.

Richardson Independent School District Quick Facts

Among the 150 largest districts in the nation

Sixth most diverse district in Texas, out of 1,000 school districts

~38,000 students across 55 campuses

32% English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL)

21% Black students

29% White students

37% Hispanic students

55% of students across the district are on free and reduced lunch

Challenges

With nearly 38,000 students in the district spanning 55 campuses, no two schools are the same and one size does not fit all for Richardson ISD. Using both an achievement battery and a figural reasoning test proved time-consuming and ultimately inadequate when it came to evaluating the ability and potential for learning of students across a diverse district where many students are under-resourced.

Based on an analysis of the district's demographics, the group identified for gifted and talented programming was noticeably imbalanced proportionate to the student population. Richardson ISD needed a better solution that would help them equitably assess student potential while equipping educators with the tools to best recognize and nurture their students' raw talent.

Overview of Solutions

Richardson ISD currently utilizes the evidence-based practice of universal screening with *CogAT* for all students in both 2nd and 6th grades. Utilizing multiple norming pathways for the test results, Richardson ISD was able to dramatically change the proportionate makeup of the identified pool of their gifted and talented students while alleviating concerns about over- and under-identification. Additionally, they found ways to inform instructional design, bolster Gen Ed teacher training, and strengthen programs for under-resourced students by putting *CogAT* data to use for all students – not just those identified for gifted and talented services.

"One Size Does Not Fit All" in Texas' Sixth-Most Diverse District

With 55 campuses spread throughout small, suburban neighborhoods and across the urban metroplex of Dallas, Richardson ISD – the sixth-most diverse school district in Texas – is comprised of a variety of school configurations, in which no two schools are the same.

There are almost 38,000 students in Richardson ISD, 55% of whom are on free and reduced lunch (FRL). Some campuses have very few FRL students while nearly all students receive FRL at other campuses. Approximately 32% of students across the district are English learners with additional needs for language support and instruction.

With a broad range of demographics across its schools, Monica Simonds, Director of Advanced Learning Programs and Services for Richardson ISD, knew her district needed a more robust tool to reliably assess the unique abilities of students and promote equity and inclusivity across the district.

37% of students across the district are English learners with additional needs for language support and instruction.

Global Ability Over Achievement "Gatekeepers"

When Ms. Simonds was introduced to *CogAT* nine years ago, she directed her department to make the shift in assessments immediately and never looked back. Prior to selecting *CogAT* and expanding universal screening, Richardson ISD was using separate achievement and "nonverbal" figural reasoning tests for their talent identification process.

> ***"Achievement tests are gatekeepers that don't always allow for potential ability to be identified. Finding the right assessment was first and foremost on my list of priorities, and the results were very encouraging – we were finding kids we weren't finding before."***
>
> **– Monica Simonds, Director of Advanced Learning Programs and Services, Richardson ISD**

One of the most compelling features of *CogAT* is its discrete components to measure student capacity to reason with semantic / linguistic (Verbal), Quantitative, and figural (Nonverbal) constructs, which Simonds said makes it a "one-stop shop." Obtaining data points across multiple domains of reasoning is critically important to form an accurate and broader picture of each student's unique abilities when doing universal screening.

Prior to implementing *CogAT*, Richardson ISD conducted analyses that showed their identified students did not proportionally reflect key demographics of their student population. Additionally, students who had access to greater learning opportunities beyond those available to their less-resourced peers were over-represented in gifted placement using achievement tests that may be more reflective of education.

Utilizing *CogAT* in their universal screening allowed Richardson ISD to get a much more nuanced picture of an individual student's level of ability. Screening for ability versus achievement mastery enabled the district to fundamentally change the makeup of their gifted identified student population to address the over- and under-representation of demographic groups among identified students.

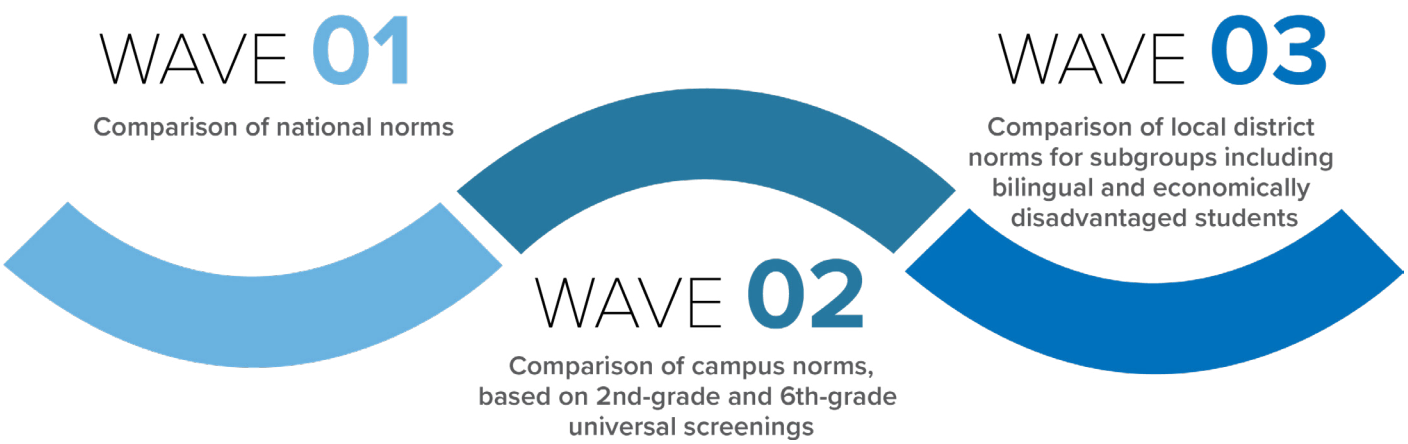
How Universal Screening and Local Norms Created a More Equitable District

Prior to the implementation of universal screening, *CogAT* was administered only to those students who were referred for gifted services screening by their parents or teachers. By allowing every student to participate in a universal screening in both 2nd and 6th grades, Richardson ISD helped cut down on the under-identification of minority and economically disadvantaged students, who may have been previously overlooked due to bias in the referral system.

> ***Richardson ISD helped cut down on the under-identification of minority and economically disadvantaged students, who may have been previously overlooked due to bias in the referral system.***

In addition to universal screening, Richardson ISD also implemented the use of local norms, including district-wide, building-level, and subgroup-specific comparisons. Examining several different local norms comparisons enables best practices for diversified identification and programing to inform learning goals across general education, gifted and talented, and Special Education.

Richardson ISD follows a three-stage process in evaluating student scores:



Students may be identified for gifted and talented services through any of these multiple pathways. For example, in the initial implementation, this three-step process using local and national norms resulted in the identification of nearly ten times as many students in 2nd grade at one Title I school in Richardson ISD where the majority of students are economically-disadvantaged and the student population is very diverse. Previously, only about 1% of students in each of the 1st and 2nd grades were identified as gifted and talented. In other grades, about 2% of 3rd graders and 4–5% of students in each of the 4th through 6th grades were identified.

10%

Nearly ten percent (9.88%) of 2nd grade students were identified to receive gifted services

When a new second grade class began, all students were tested in grade-wide universal screening. Students' scores were then evaluated using three-stages of normative comparisons (Waves 1–3 including national norms, building local norms, and district-wide local norms for subgroups). Using this method, nearly ten percent (9.88%) of 2nd grade students were identified as gifted and talented – an increase of nearly 10 times as many 2nd graders identified with the implementation of universal screening and local normative comparisons.

> ***"No test will make a difference until you analyze the data appropriately. We use the data to highlight what a student is capable of because performance is not always an indicator of potential."*** - Monica Simonds

Expanding on *CogAT*'s Utility with the Use of Student *Ability Profiles*™

While *CogAT* is most commonly used to screen for students scoring high on reasoning ability for inclusion in accelerated academics (i.e. "gifted and talented" programs), Richardson ISD discovered they could also use *CogAT* scores for other purposes by expanding access to the data to include dyslexia diagnosticians, Special Education, and English-as-a-Second- Language (ESL) educators.

CogAT not only helps to identify students who need adapted instruction – due to either substantially higher or lower abilities – but also:

A Provides a measure of cognitive development

B Identifies students whose predicted levels of achievement are markedly different from their observed levels of achievement

C Provides the data necessary to help classroom teachers of all kinds adapt their instructional goals, methods, and materials to meet the individual needs of their students through *CogAT*'s unique *Ability Profile* score

Within Richardson ISD, dyslexia diagnosticians regularly use *CogAT* data to help build a complete profile of the learner as part of their dyslexia screening process. Using *CogAT* scores, they now look for gaps between *CogAT* ability scores as a predictor of achievement and observed achievement test scores. For instance, they examine whether students whose achievement test scores indicate reading difficulties have corresponding scores on Verbal reasoning. If the student's *CogAT* scores are significantly higher on Verbal and achievement scores much lower on Reading, they may be referred for further screening for dyslexia.

Special Student Services and ESL staff also review *CogAT* scores to evaluate whether their students' scores might be impacted due to language. For primary grade students (Grades K–2), the Sentence Completion subtest is the only subtest, of three in the Verbal battery, requiring specific language facility. When this subtest is omitted, the student receives an "Alternative-Verbal" (or ALT-V) score based on two language-neutral Verbal subtests. Richardson ISD takes the additional step of administering all three subtests and scoring the Verbal section both ways to provide a Verbal and an ALT-V score. Staff look for a differential of at least 10 to 15 percentile ranks higher on the ALT-Verbal versus the full *CogAT* Verbal score as an indicator that the student's verbal reasoning might be impeded due to a language barrier. On the other hand, students who are well-resourced and score significantly higher on the Verbal than the ALT-Verbal score may have solid vocabulary skills due to early language development but may need additional support in other verbal reasoning areas.

CogAT Ability Profile scores allow Richardson ISD to make use of test results for all students, whether they are identified for services or not. The district uses *Ability Profile* scores to inform instructional planning at the school level, in the classroom, for individual students and to drive parent-teacher conference dialogue. Ability Profile scores provide a concise and easily understood summary to highlight each student's overall level of ability unique pattern of strengths and opportunity for learning to allow teachers and parents to work together to help students maximize their potential.

Best Practice Insights

Richardson ISD, a diverse district where no two schools are the same, provides a wonderful example of how the implementation of *CogAT* and use of best practices drive real results for student success. Adding *CogAT* to their program and rethinking identification processes enabled real change in the district with respect to the number of students identified for Advanced Learning Programs and greater representation of previously under-served groups.

Some important lessons about best practices are illustrated by Richardson ISD's practices. This recipe of steps offers greater equity and opportunity for each child to reach their full potential and unlock their unique giftedness:

1

Responsiveness to the needs of diverse students requires the right evaluation process to reach students at critical academic and developmental inflection points.

- Universal screening has been shown to be the single most effective contributor to equity for diverse student groups
- Adopting universal screening at multiple grades/ages, including primary, middle, and high school, allows students multiple points of entry as they grow and develop at different rates

2

Taking a multi-dimensional view of student potential enables students with different gifts to be considered equally.

- Even the most able students have different patterns of strength and opportunities for growth across verbal, quantitative, and figural areas of reasoning
- Evaluating multiple dimensions of ability provides more students access to demonstrate their strengths

3

Using local norms for campuses and subgroups takes into consideration the most relevant context for student placement.

- Local norms help to identify those students who are most ready for greater challenge

4

Assessments can be made more accessible for English learners and disadvantaged students by using language neutral administration.

- *CogAT* provides language neutral administration with the Alternative-Verbal scale
- Audio administration is available in several languages with *CogAT*
- Free practice activities are included to ensure that students understand the items and testing tasks

5

Sharing ability data across the educator ecosystem - and not restricting it to use for gifted identification - offers new and different insights into students' opportunities for learning.

- Leveraging the personalized student *Ability Profile* scores informs differentiated instruction to support clustering in the classroom to benefit all students and accelerate growth