

239,517 Children Trapped in Political Rhetoric

In an effort to solicit support for his voucher plan, the lieutenant governor recently told a group of education and business leaders in Dallas that 239,517 children attend a “failing public school in Texas.” (Source: <http://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2016/10/20/texas-lt-gov-dan-patrick-vows-push-school-choice-session-session>). Advocates of choice and vouchers often say that students are “trapped” in failing schools. The phrasing takes advantage of an accountability system that is designed to identify at least 5% of all schools in the state as “failing,” regardless of how well the schools, or the students enrolled in them, performed. Perhaps a better assessment is that students are trapped in the political rhetoric around school choice and/or school vouchers. (“School choice” is considered to be a broad term that subsumes vouchers and education savings grants, either or both of which take taxpayer dollars away from public schools and shifts them to the private sector.)

Education Commissioner Mike Morath recently told the TASA/TASB convention audience that, “*We get beaten up for what we do, but our public schools are doing as well as they’ve ever done.*” The same can be said for the parents and teachers of children in schools that have high educational risk factors. What do the numbers really tell us about Texas students and the accountability system that shadows their daily walk in Texas public schools?

- During the 2015-16 school year, Texas public schools enrolled 5,284,252 students. That means that over 5 million (5,044,735 or 95%) students were enrolled in campuses that received a TEA rating of Met Standard.
- In fact, 7,667 out of 8,673 or 88% of Texas public schools in 2015-16, inclusive of charter schools, received a Met Standard rating. When charters are excluded, the figure rises above 89%. (Source: *TEA 2016 Preliminary Accountability System State Summary, as of September 14, 2016.*)
- The number of schools not meeting standards has declined each year since 2013, when the count stood at 768 Improvement Required (IR-rated) campuses compared to the most recent count of 467 IR-rated campuses — even as the accountability system has become more rigorous.

Those who indiscriminately cite the 239, 517 figure for shock value fail to tell the REST of the story. While it’s true that 239,517 students are **enrolled** at one of the 467 public and/or charter schools that received a TEA rating of Improvement Required for the 2015-16 school year, **that does not mean that the students, or their schools, are “failing”** as some voucher advocates state. Here are the numbers behind the rhetoric that tell the REST of the story.

- Over half of the IR campuses (259 out of 467 or 55%) were rated IR for the first time. (Table 2)
- Over half of the 239,517 students (52%) are enrolled in a campus that was rated Improvement Required (IR) for the first time. (Table 2) Historically, Year 1 IR campuses quickly improve and are removed from TEA’s IR list faster than other IR campuses.
- 72% are enrolled at a Year 1 or Year 2 IR campus. (Table 2)
- 51 campuses missed only one – out of four possible – index target. (Table 3)
- Only 35 out of 8,673 campuses missed all 4 index targets. (Table 3)
- 25,218 students are enrolled in one of the 68 charter schools with an IR rating. (Table 1) To our knowledge, no students are required to attend charter schools.
- Out of the 467 schools rated in 2016 as Improvement Required, 102 graduated a total of 10,558 students in SY 2014-15. Of those, 8,349 or 79% of the graduates had completed rigorous programs of study, including Recommended High School Plan, Distinguished Plan, Foundation Plan with Endorsements, or Foundation Plan with Distinguished Level of Achievement.
- The phrasing, “*trapped in failing schools*” paints a picture of “no way out.” In fact, all 399 IR-rated non-charter campuses were subject to Public Education Grant (PEG) requirements to offer choice

options to each one of their enrolled students. Over 1,100 more schools that were **not** rated as Improvement Required in 2015 also were subject to PEG requirements, due to IR ratings in either of the prior two years and/or performance criteria distinct from state ratings. None of this takes into account any other forms of choice available within the districts right now.

And finally, those who disparage public schools fail to point out that in Texas, at least 5% of the schools will be designated by TEA as “failing” ***simply by virtue of the accountability system’s design.***

- The current accountability system (based largely on STAAR tests) is designed to identify at least 5% of schools as missing standards, or “failing” – because the targets it uses are built on a quota established in federal law.
- That means that we can reasonably anticipate that **at least** 264,000 (5% of Texas enrollment) students will be enrolled in low performing campuses – even if their campuses performed better than they did the year before; and even if their local communities rate them as Exemplary, Recognized or Acceptable on the Family and Community Engagement Ratings that are required by state law.
- The shift to an A-F rating system, in which both D’s and F’s are statutorily required to signify “unacceptable” performance, automatically ensures that more students will be enrolled in “failing schools” if the bottom 5% of campuses are given F’s and the next 10% are given D’s. This predetermined outcome will feed right into a fresh, new round of rhetoric from “school choice” advocates, ***even though the “increase” is simply a function of the system’s design.***

The original intent of our state’s accountability system was to foster, inform and support continuous improvement efforts in teaching and learning. That seemed to be a universally accepted premise. Having a predetermined failure threshold in the current system seems to 1) subvert that original, positive intent, 2) reinforce a biased narrative about the state of public education, and 3) perpetuate the notion that schools must be punished before improvements will take place. At best, it seems unwise to put faith in a system that generates predetermined results with regard to “failing” schools. Before any school is labeled as a “failure,” we need to critically reconsider the rhetoric (and the hidden agenda) of voucher advocates in using an accountability system to create a certain margin of schools as “failing” the students, parents and communities that they serve.

2015-16 Improvement Required (IR) Campus Statistics

Table 1. TEA rated 467 campuses as Improvement Required (IR) in 2015-16.

2015-16 School Year	Number of IR Schools	% of IR Schools	Total IR School Enrollment	% of IR School Enrollment
Total IR Campuses	467	--	239,517	--
467 IR Schools by Type and Enrollment				
Charter Schools*	68	15%	25,218	11%
Alt. Ed. Schools*	25	5%	3,801	2%
All Other Schools	374	80%	210,498	88%

*3 schools are both charter and alt.ed. Campuses

Table 2. Over half of the 467 campuses are in their first year of IR status.

Nbr of Years Rated IR	Nbr of IR Schools by Year(s) Rated IR	Total School Enrollment by Year(s) IR	% School Enrollment by Year(s) IR
1	259	123,857	52%
2	83	47,511	20%
3	50	30,010	13%
4	54	28,289	12%
5	19	8,844	4%
6	1	422	<1%
7	1	584	<1%
Totals	467	239,517	--

Table 3. The state accountability system is based on meeting performance targets on four indexes. 51 campuses missed one index and only 35 campuses missed all four index targets.

Number Indexes Missed (out of 4 possible indexes)	Nbr of Schools	% of Schools
0*	16	3%
1	51	11%
2	232	50%
3	133	28%
4	35	7%

*K-2 Campus is paired with another school who missed 1 or more targets

Paired Campuses	Enrollment	% Enrollment
16	5487	2%

Sources: TEA 2016 Accountability Data Files and Preliminary 2016 Accountability Ratings Summary