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Texas Education News
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Eighty-Three Percent of Fifth-Grade Students and 75 Percent of Eighth-Grade Students Pass TAKS Math

As about 3 million students across the state spent the day taking a Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) exam in math or reading, the Texas Education Agency announced the results of tests given earlier this month. Eighty-three percent of fifth-grade students and 75 percent of eighth graders passed the math TAKS on the first administration. Students in those two grades must pass the math and reading exams to be promoted to the next grade.

This marks the first year that the state's promotion requirements apply to

eighth-grade students. It also marks a year of significant change in the state's testing program. In order to comply with requirements of the federal No Child Left Behind Act, Texas has replaced a test called the State Developed Alternative Assessment II or SDAA II, which was an exam given to many students served by special education, with new versions of the TAKS.

TAKS includes a form called TAKS (Accommodated) for student served by special education who meet the eligibility requirements for certain specific accommodations. The TAKS (Accommodated) form includes format accommodations such as larger fonts and fewer items per page and contains no embedded field-test items. Many students who are receiving special education services this year are taking TAKS (Accommodated).

TAKS (Accommodated), as required by federal law, tests students served by special education on material at the grade level in which they are enrolled. SDAA II allowed students to be tested at their instructional level, which for most children served by special education was lower than the grade level at which they were enrolled.

Test results reported today include both TAKS and TAKS (Accommodated) results. TAKS results reported in 2003-2007 are for TAKS only because TAKS (Accommodated) was not a testing option until 2008.

At fifth grade, 83 percent of the total students who took the TAKS or TAKS (Accommodated) test in English, passed the math exam and 39 percent earned Commended Performance.

Following are the passing rates, called Met the Standard, and Commended Performance levels for the state's major student groups. The percentages represent combined TAKS and TAKS (Accommodated) passing rates.

Student group	Percent Met the Standard	Percent Commended Performance
Asian American	96	70
African American	73	24
Hispanic	80	32
White	90	50
All students	83	39

Texas Students Earn Higher Scores on NAEP

Eighth Grade Writing Exam Than Their Ethnic Peers Nationally

Students in Texas' major ethnic groups earned higher average scale scores on a national eighth-grade writing exam than did their peer groups nationally, according to results released today by the U.S. Department of Education.

Overall, however, scores on the 2007 National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) writing exam were relatively stable for Texas' eighth graders who earned an average scale score of 151. That is not significantly different from the average scale score of 152 earned by Texan students in 2002.

Nationally, eighth-grade students received an average scale score of 154 in 2007, compared to 152 in 2002.

The percentage of Texas students who performed at or above the NAEP Basic level was 86 percent in 2007, compared to 83 percent in 2002.

This exam, given to a nationally representative sample of eighth graders, covers narrative, informative and persuasive writing.

Texas' diverse student population performed well in comparison to their peers.

Texas' white students, who made up 37 percent of the eighth-grade population sampled in 2007, received an average scale score of 165,

compared to 162 for white students nationally. White students accounted for 58 percent of the eighth-grade class sampled nationally.

Texas' Hispanic students earned an average scale score of 142, compared to a score of 141 for Hispanic students across the country. In this state, 44 percent of the eighth-grade class is Hispanic, compared to 19 percent for all the test-taking population in the country.

Scores for African-American students were 142 for Texas students and 140 nationally. African-Americans make up 15 percent of the Texas class and 17 percent of the group in the United States.

Among Asian/Pacific Islanders, Texas students posted an average scale score of 167, compared to 166 for the group nationally. Asian/Pacific Islander students represent 3 percent of the Texas population and 5 percent of the national population.

Texas Renaissance Festival – School Days

The Texas Renaissance Festival invites all public, private and home school educators and students to join them for an interactive educational event like no other in the New World! Their 4th annual School Days will be held on Tuesday and Wednesday, October 28 and 29, 2008.

Tickets are \$6.00 per person. The Ticket Reservation deadline is October 1, 2008. _

New this year will be The School Days Performing Arts Festival, an opportunity for students of theater and music, both vocal and instrumental; to perform classic works in a competition judged by music and theater professionals. _

For more information about School Days or the Performing Arts Festival visit the School Days page at

<http://www.texrenfest.com/dialup/schooldays.html>

Time Running Out for Texas School Districts to Complete Bus Safety Training

Online Training Program Already Chosen by More Than 400 Districts

Can Help Districts Beat Upcoming Deadline

Texas school districts must step on the gas to meet the state's May 31 deadline to complete school bus safety training mandated by House Bill 3190. The good news is that a comprehensive online training program, SafePupilTransport (**www.SafePupilTransport.com**), can make safety compliance easy for all districts to pass.

With the compliance deadline looming, more than 40 percent of the state's 1,152 school districts have already chosen SafePupilTransport to help meet school bus evacuation training requirements, according to Jay Wommack, CEO of Texarkana-based Vertical Alliance Group, which developed the safety training program. SafePupilTransport offers a compliance kit specifically created to address Texas HB 3190, which requires school districts to train all students and teaching staff on emergency school bus evacuations at least twice annually.

Authored by Rep. Helen Giddings and sponsored by Sen. John Carona, the bill also prohibits any person who has committed certain offenses from operating a school bus for at least 10 years. In addition, it requires operators to wear seatbelts if available, and prohibits school bus operation beyond the manufacturer's design capacity.

The law officially went into effect on Sept. 1, 2007, and it established Dec. 1, 2007 as the initial compliance deadline for school districts.

"For many school districts working on their own, it was virtually impossible to train dozens of bus drivers and thousands of students by the original deadline," Wommack said. "Because of the enormity of the challenge, the state extended the deadline to May 31."

The school bus evacuation training compliance kit from SafePupilTransport includes two training videos on DVD. The first is used to train instructors on how to perform the evacuation walkthrough with students, and the second is for students to view prior to participating in the walkthrough itself.

"Rather than struggling to create a program themselves, we are encouraging school districts to rely on the SafePupilTransport compliance kit," Wommack

said. "This will eliminate logistical problems, as well as time and cost constraints. Simply put, if school districts act now, we can help them get into compliance on time."

In addition to training videos, the package provides all necessary paperwork districts are required to file with the state, as well as handouts for students and teachers, reporting forms, question and answer guides, and detailed instructions on how and when to implement each step of the program.

For a one-time licensing fee of \$150, a school district can share the entire program with every teacher, pupil and facility in its system, Wommack said.

Vertical Alliance Group developed SafePupilTransport in response to the reported 16,000 school bus collisions that occur annually nationwide, resulting in 12,000 injuries and 130 deaths, many of which could be avoided with proper safety training. In addition to the HB 3190 compliance kit, the program provides school bus drivers with a wide range of online training.

For more information, visit **www.SafePupilTransport.com**

Urban School Students Score at Highest Levels Ever On State and Federal Tests

Report Includes City-by-City Profiles of Big-City School District Trends On Math and Reading Assessments

Austin Independent School District

<http://www.cgcs.org/BTO8/Austin.pdf>

Dallas Independent School District

<http://www.cgcs.org/BTO8/Dallas.pdf>

Fort Worth Independent School District

<http://www.cgcs.org/BTO8/Fort%20Worth.pdf>

Houston Independent School District

<http://www.cgcs.org/BTO8/Houston.pdf>

Students in the nation's major city public school districts continue to advance in reading and math on state tests and on the more rigorous federal test– the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP).

A new report analyzing academic progress in 66 urban school systems in 37 states and the District of Columbia shows substantially higher test scores in 2007 than in 2003 in fourth and eighth-grade mathematics and reading on state assessments. It indicates that the state and national test scores are at their highest levels since academic proficiency data have been collected for urban schools.

Beating the Odds: An Analysis of Student Performance and Achievement Gaps on State Assessments by the Council of the Great City Schools compares this past school year's state test scores with those reported a year after the federal *No Child Left Behind* law was implemented in 2002, requiring school districts to report performance levels based on state tests and show the percentage of students who score at the "proficient" level.

The *Beating the Odds* findings for the 2006- 2007 school year show that 63 percent of urban school students scored at or above the proficient level in fourth-grade math on their respective state assessments, a whopping 14 percentage point gain from 49 percent in 2003. For eighth-graders, the percentage climbed to 55 percent, compared with 42 percent in 2003, a 13 percentage point rise.

In reading, urban schoolchildren also posted gains over the past four years. From 2003 to 2007, the percentage of fourth-graders scoring at or above the proficient level in reading on state tests rose to 60 percent from 51 percent – a 9 percentage point hike. For eighth-graders, the percentage increased to 51 percent from 43 percent in 2003, an 8 percentage point gain.

National Test Assessments

The report also reveals that the state-test trends coincide with NAEP gains by urban students, but with lower percentages of students scoring at or above the proficient level on what is generally considered a more rigorous exam than most state tests.

Students in big-city public schools have made faster math and reading gains than the nation on the NAEP over the past few years, according to *The Nation's Report Card* for 2007 released by the U.S. Department of Education. The report last November marked the first time that the nation could see four- or five-year trends on NAEP for the country's major urban public school systems since the Trial Urban District Assessment (TUDA) was launched in reading in 2002 and math in 2003.

Some 28 percent of urban fourth-graders scored at or above the proficient level in math in 2007 on NAEP, an 8 percentage point hike from 20 percent in 2003. In reading, 22 percent of urban schoolchildren in fourth grade reached or went beyond the proficient level in 2007, a 5 percentage point increase from 17 percent in 2002.

Beating the Odds also includes how student test scores in 11 big-city school districts that volunteered for the trial urban NAEP compare with scores on their respective state tests. Among the 11 cities are New York, Los Angeles and Chicago, the nation's three largest school systems.

Although urban schools show gains in math and reading performance, the districts still generally lag behind state and national averages in fourth and eighth grades, and acknowledge that they still have a long way to go to reach proficiency levels. But there are exceptions.

State Math Achievement

In the report's eighth annual analysis, data show that 22 percent of urban school districts now score as high as or higher than their respective states in fourth-grade math, and 16 percent score as high or higher at the eighth-grade level in 2007.

The school districts with both fourth- and eighth-grade math scores equal to or greater than their respective states are Anchorage, Broward County (Fort Lauderdale, Fla.), Charleston, New Orleans, Palm Beach and Portland, Ore.

State Reading Progress

In 2007, 16 percent of urban school districts scored at or above their respective states in fourth-grade reading, and 14 percent at the eighth-grade level. The school districts with both fourth- and eighth-grade reading scores equal to or greater than their respective states are Anchorage, Broward County (Fort Lauderdale, Fla.), Charleston, New Orleans, Portland, Ore., San Diego and San Francisco.

Achievement Gaps

Beating the Odds VIII also indicates that racial achievement gaps in urban schools narrowed in math between 2003 and 2007, although they remain wide. Some 66 percent of bigcity school districts narrowed the gap between their fourth-grade African-American students and white counterparts statewide in math proficiency – 63 percent in eighth-grade math.

Among Hispanic students, 63 percent of the urban school districts narrowed the gap with white fourth-graders statewide – 58 percent in eighth-grade.

In reading, between 2003 and 2007, 64 percent of major city school systems narrowed the achievement gap between fourth-grade African-American students and white counterparts statewide in reading proficiency – 67 percent at the eighth-grade level. Among Hispanic students, 57 percent of urban school districts narrowed the gap with white fourth-graders statewide – 63 percent in eighth grade.

Urban Environment America's big-city school systems enroll about one-quarter, or 26 percent, of all students of color in the nation, and a disproportionately high number of English language learners and poor students.

The report attributes the standards movement as the catalyst that triggered change in urban schools. It gave urban school administrators direction on what they were being held responsible for delivering.

Beating the Odds analyzed two assessments – state and national – because the nation does not have a single system to measure progress relative to the same standard across school districts in all states.

Martin Middle School, Texas

Walking Through and Talking About Instruction

"What are your expectations in this classroom? How will I know if your students are learning?" ask Principal Rheba Jones as she talks to a teacher at Martin Middle School in Corpus Christi, Texas. Jones leads a team of observers into every classroom of this 700 student school. As a group, they establish their purpose for visiting. They observe the student work on the walls, current assignments, cumulative portfolios and journals. Then, they debrief as a group. "We ask," notes Jones, "what did we see today? Where are we moving as a school? Did you see evidence of progress in this classroom? Are we moving quickly enough?"

It is all part of a walkthrough process based on inquiry developed by the Learning Research and Development Center at the University of Pittsburgh. "This process moved our school from defining clear expectations to academic rigor," said Jones.

This urban middle school with a student body that is 98 percent Latino and where 78 percent of the students qualify for free or reduced price

lunch, has made significant progress. Just three years ago, the school barely held off a "low-performing school" designation, now the school is considered "exemplary" by the state of Texas with 80 percent of the students mastering statewide assessments.

Jones is clear on the challenges: "When we started this work we knew it needed to happen, but it was much bigger than we ever thought. We're moving forward now."

Complete report: http://www.naesp.org/client_files/LLC-Exec-Sum.pdf

Clear Creek ISD

The district's schools are recognized for their academic achievements, with most campuses rated 'Exemplary' and 'Recognized' by the state. The district also anticipates it will be in the final phases of its capital plan with use of its next authorization. In assigning this rating, Fitch Ratings also considered that overall debt levels are significantly higher than many other school districts in Texas. However, higher than average wealth levels along with ongoing TAV growth help mitigate the debt level concerns. Debt amortization is slow, but typical of growing school districts in Texas. Given ongoing operating pressures associated with enrollment growth, the continuance of solid reserves will be integral to maintaining credit quality.

Straddling Harris and Galveston counties, the district encompasses 120 square miles and includes several cities; the largest is League City, which has grown on average nearly 6% annually since 2000 to an estimated population of 65,351 in 2006. While primarily residential with a sizable number of residents commuting to jobs in the Houston metropolitan area, the district also supports aerospace, petrochemical, shipping, and higher education sectors. The National Aeronautics and Space Administration's Johnson Space Center (NASA) is in the district and employs more than 16,000 civil service workers and contractors. The Bayport Industrial Park (Bayport) also is in the district, offering a deepwater port and channel facility connected to the Houston Ship Channel to its more than 60 industrial plants.

Although approximately 70% built-out, the district continues to benefit from development primarily in and around the southern portion of the district (League City) with additional commercial development along the Interstate 45 corridor, even with the nationwide slowdown in housing activity. Enrollment growth is expected to continue with the addition of 800 students-1,000 students annually due to the district's many highly rated schools as well. Current enrollment is slightly more than 36,000. Outpacing enrollment gains, taxable assessed valuation has steadily expanded at an average annual rate approaching 8% since fiscal 2003, despite the considerable amount of tax-exempt land in the district that includes NASA, the University of Houston at Clear Lake, and the San Jacinto Junior College District campuses.

Financial performance remains favorable, as the district recorded an operating surplus for the fifth straight year in fiscal 2007, resulting in the maintenance of above-average fund balance levels. In the last three fiscal years, the district has spent an average of \$16 million annually for pay-go capital outlays, striving to maintain a roughly \$20 million capital replacement fund for ongoing rehabilitation needs. The district also maintains a \$2.5 million disaster recovery fund, and an insurance reserve fund to help pay for increasing property and casualty insurance costs. Even with these outlays and ongoing cost pressures associated with an expanding student population, the district has managed since fiscal 2004 to post unreserved balances of no less than 20% of spending, which exceeds the district's operating reserve policy amount of at least two months of expenditures. It is anticipated that there will be a modest addition to the general fund balance in fiscal 2008 by year's end, despite across-the-board salary increases, the hiring of more than 200 additional staff, and the opening of the district's fourth high school. Plans for fiscal 2009 include the utilization of at least \$0.02 of the discretionary tax levy 'pennies' for additional staffing needs.

To meet expanding capital needs, district debt levels rose in recent years, but are expected to moderate somewhat since most of the facility needs at the high school level will be met with the current authorization and the school district uses substantial amounts of pay-go for capital projects. The current issuance is the second installment of a \$183 million authorization approved by 72% of voters in May 2007. After this sale, the district will have approximately \$66 million in remaining authorization. District officials anticipate this will meet facility needs until 2010, at which time the district expects to approach voters with additional bond package request, most likely smaller in size. Including a sizable amount of overlapping debt from municipal utility districts, typical of the Houston area, overall debt levels are very high at 8.8% of TAV. The pace of debt retirement is slow with about 35% maturing in 10 years.

2008 Ron Brown Scholars

San Antonio resident Diana A. Ofosu of Communications Arts High School has been selected as a 2008 Ron Brown Scholar. Chosen from more than 5,600 high school students, Ofosu is one of only 20 African American students from across the country awarded this honor.

Exhibiting a profound commitment to community service activities, Ofosu participates in the Helping Hands Community Service Club and the Students Taking Active Roles in Society Club, and serves as the World

Affairs School Delegate. Recipient of the Tim Duncan Character Award and the Princeton Book Award, she is also a member of the Latin Club, the Film Club, the Environmental Club and the Spanish Honor Society.

Frisco resident Ethan G. Monreal-Jackson of Frisco High School and Fort Worth resident Kiah C. Thorn of All Saints' Episcopal School in Fort Worth have also been selected as 2008 Ron Brown Scholars. Chosen from more than 5,600 high school students, these two remarkable seniors are two of only 20 African American students from across the country awarded this honor.

A senior leader in the Fellowship of Christian Athletes, Monreal-Jackson exhibits a true passion for serving others. In addition to a part-time job, his volunteer work includes feeding the homeless and participating in a canned food drive. He has also been recognized as an AP Black National Merit Scholar. Thorn shares Monreal-Jackson's strong commitment to helping others. The Salutatorian at All Saints' Episcopal School, she is a volunteer for HOPE Farm where she mentors at-risk minority youth. She also recently completed an internship with Congressman Michael C. Burgess, M.D. A member of the Fort Worth Youth Advisory Board, Thorn has received several national recognitions for her academics, including being selected as a National Latin Award winner, a National Achievement Semi-Finalist, and a National Merit Commended Scholar.

"I am continually impressed by the thousands of students who apply to become Ron Brown Scholars," said Michael Mallory, executive director of the Ron Brown Scholar Program. "Ethan and Kiah both share a strong desire for learning that is evident in their spectacular academic and extracurricular successes. They are part of a tremendous group of gifted young people who all bring their unique backgrounds and personal experiences to benefit the Ron Brown Scholar Program and their communities as a whole."

Founded in 1996 and named in honor of the first African American Secretary of Commerce, the Ron Brown Scholar Program provides students with the financial resources to attend some of the finest colleges and universities in the country, in addition to promoting outstanding service opportunities for the next generation of promising African American leaders.

Ron Brown Scholars are selected on the basis of demonstrated academic excellence, leadership potential, social commitment and financial need. Some key highlights of the program include:

- More than half of Ron Brown Scholars attend Ivy League universities;
- Two Ron Brown Scholars were elected to be the First Marshals of their Harvard University graduating classes, considered the highest honor bestowed upon an undergraduate;
- One Ron Brown Scholar has been selected as a Truman Scholar and

two Ron Brown Scholars have been selected as finalists for the Rhodes Scholarship;

- Ron Brown Scholars dedicate themselves to enriching lives in their local communities and worldwide. For example, nine Ron Brown Scholars have conducted AIDS research and community service with the Institute of Human Virology;
- With a 100% graduation rate, Ron Brown Scholars go on to succeed in a variety of leadership positions. From finance executives and top lawyers, to award-winning playwrights and Supreme Court Justice clerks, they have published books and documentaries, appeared as expert guests on radio and television, and been invited as speakers to numerous international conferences.

Applicants must proceed through a highly competitive selection process against thousands of other qualified candidates, culminating in an invitation to spend a weekend in Washington, D.C. for the final round of interviews. Up to twenty winners are chosen at the conclusion of this weekend where they are formally introduced as lifelong members of the Ron Brown Scholar Program family.

Monreal-Jackson and Thorn are only the fifth and sixth Dallas-Forth Worth area students admitted to the Ron Brown Scholar Program since its inception in 1996. For biographical information on Ethan Monreal-Jackson, Kiah Thorn and all 20 Scholars, or for more information about the Ron Brown Scholar Program, visit **www.ronbrown.org**.

About the Ron Brown Scholar Program

Named for the late Secretary of Commerce and inspired by his dedication to public service, the Ron Brown Scholar Program was established in 1996 to provide academic scholarships, service opportunities and leadership experiences for young African Americans of outstanding promise. The Program seeks to accelerate their progress into the mainstream of leadership positions in business, education, government and a wide spectrum of professions, while instilling a dedication to leadership and service.

Leander ISD

The district continues to attract new students at a rapid pace. Enrollment, currently totaling 26,500-plus students, has grown by nearly 10% annually for the past five fiscal years. Despite increased spending pressures associated with higher enrollment, the district continues to add to its healthy

reserve levels. The underlying 'A+' rating on the district's unlimited tax bonds reflects its history of solid financial performance while contending with pressures associated with rapid enrollment growth. This success has been the product of sound management and planning practices and a conservative budgeting philosophy. However, growth-generated debt issuances keep debt ratios at very high levels.

Largely residential in character, the district serves a nearly 200-square-mile area in southwestern Williamson County and western Travis County and is part of the Austin metropolitan area. The availability of affordable housing continues to attract buyers from all parts of central Texas. As a result, demographic projections suggest enrollment will more than double to about 58,000 by fiscal 2018. The district's taxable assessed valuation (TAV) growth rate slowed somewhat in fiscal years 2004 and 2005; however, spurred by strong residential construction, TAV growth expanded rapidly over the past three fiscal years, averaging annual gains of nearly 20% since fiscal 2006.

Financial results continue to be impressive, reflecting the conservative nature of the budgeting and planning practices of the district. The district consistently has recorded operating surpluses, and another operating surplus is projected for fiscal 2008. At the close of fiscal 2007, the unreserved general fund balance totaled roughly \$60 million, which represented 36% of spending and transfers out. This result handily exceeded the district's optimum unreserved general fund balance target of 25% of expenditures. Healthy reserve levels enhance the district's financial flexibility.

District debt levels, as measured on a per capita basis and as a percentage of TAV, are very high. In addition, amortization is slow, reflecting the use of capital appreciation bonds (CABs) to minimize tax rate impacts and to shift the debt burden to future taxpayers. In addition, recent debt offerings (including the series 2008 bonds) have been structured with a payout exceeding 30 years in order to meet the district's capital requirements while keeping the debt service tax rate below the Texas attorney general's \$0.50 per \$100 of TAV debt service tax rate cap. Debt ratios will likely remain high for some time, given the district's additional borrowing needs.

Approximately \$232.4 million of this issuance represents the first installment of a \$559 million authorization approved by voters in November 2007; the remaining \$37.8 million in new money proceeds is the final amount from a \$286 million bond authorization approved in May, 2006. The 2007 authorization will fund the construction of five new elementary schools, one middle school and two high schools, school design and renovations, site acquisitions, athletic facility improvements, bus purchases and technology and other needs. This offering also includes a small refunding portion, which is expected to result in net present value savings.

