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# Dallas magnets soar in new set of school rankings

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Several Dallas ISD magnet campuses are among the best public schools in Texas, based on a new set of rankings that considers everything from test scores to class sizes to graduation rates.

The School of Science & Engineering and School for the Talented & Gifted were the No. 1 and No. 2 high schools in the state, according to Children at Risk, a Houston nonprofit group. Also cracking the top 10 was the School of Government, Law & Law Enforcement. All three campuses are housed at the Yvonne A. Ewell Townview Center in Oak Cliff.

In prior years, Children at Risk ranked only schools in the Houston area, but expanded to the rest of the state this year.

Many organizations try to pinpoint top campuses, including *Newsweek*'s list of the nation's best high schools, the state's school rating system and a host of education think tank reports. The Children at Risk study ranks Texas elementary, middle and high school campuses based on more measures than most.

For example, *Newsweek* picks the best high schools solely on the number of students who take Advanced Placement exams. The state determines quality based on test scores and dropout rates.

The Children at Risk study uses 14 categories to measure high schools, which gives parents a different lens through which to view their schools. But the rankings come with some significant caveats. Some of the area's known high-achieving schools didn't make the cut because of missing data or because their high schools aren't traditional ninth- through 12th-grade campuses.

Many of the schools at the top of the ratings were magnet schools and are selective in admissions. Unlike many other top-performing campuses, they're diverse and enroll a sizable share of low-income students, who often struggle in school.

"These schools are small and they're theme-based, and they truly try to engage kids, and they're a really good model," said Robert Sanborn, president of Children at Risk.

Three other Dallas magnet high schools made the top 10 list for North Texas, along with two charter schools, North Hills School in Irving and Fort Worth Academy of Fine Arts, Highland Park High and Coppell High were also on the list. The latter four campuses enroll few or no low-income students.

Several Dallas magnet and traditional schools also fared well among the state's middle and elementary campuses.

At the other extreme, the lowest-ranked campuses shared common themes. They tended to be in large urban districts, including Dallas and Fort Worth, and have high poverty. Dallas' Spruce High was the lowest-ranked high school in the state, while Pinkston and Samuell schools also fell near the bottom.

The findings didn't surprise Dallas Superintendent Michael Hinojosa.

"The schools at the top are magnet schools. They obviously do a great job, but they start with kids that are high-performers," he said. And that means many regular campuses, like the ones at the bottom of the list, are left with students who are more difficult to teach.

Sanborn said the low-ranked schools tend to be "big, comprehensive urban high schools that obviously are not working." He said those students would probably do better in smaller, more intimate settings.

But Hinojosa said big doesn't necessarily mean bad. Low-performing schools need academic rigor and qualified teachers. He said the district would also like to put themed programs in those big high schools, like one for health professions. "We can't find enough people qualified to teach that."

The Children at Risk rankings are based on 2007 and 2008 data, the most recent available, so this year's TAKS scores are not reflected.

Sanborn said his group's approach is comprehensive. "The thing about our system is that you can't ever game it," he said.

But interestingly, *Newsweek* and Children at Risk named the same two Dallas high schools as their very best – but in reverse order.

One big limitation of the Children at Risk study: several schools do not appear, including all Plano and most Richardson high schools. That's because Children at Risk calculates its own graduation rate based on how many students entered school as ninth-graders in 2003 and graduated in 2007. So the study leaves out high schools with no freshmen in 2003. Newer schools, such as in Frisco and McKinney, also were left out because they don't have enough years of data available.

No matter the rating system, experts say parents also need to examine the intangible qualities of a school.

Sanborn recommends "going into a school, seeing what the feel of the school is and talking to the teachers and principal."

And if you're unhappy about something? Speak up.

"Sometimes," Sanborn said, "you have to be a thorn in the side of the school district."

## TOP 20 LISTS

### Top 20 elementary schools

1. Dealey Montessori Academy Dallas ISD

- |     |   |                               |
|-----|---|-------------------------------|
| 2.  | B.F. Darrell Elementary                     | Dallas ISD                    |
| 3.  | Walnut Glen Academy                         | Garland ISD                   |
| 4.  | William B Travis Elementary                 | Dallas ISD                    |
| 5.  | Wolfe City Elementary                       | Wolfe City ISD                |
| 6.  | High Thompson Elementary                    | Dallas ISD                    |
| 7.  | Kimball Elementary                          | Mesquite ISD                  |
| 8.  | B.H. Macon Elementary                       | Dallas ISD                    |
| 9.  | Davis Elementary                            | Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD |
| 10. | Harry C. Withers Elementary                 | Dallas ISD                    |
| 11. | Blanton Elementary                          | Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD |
| 12. | Victor H. Hexter Elementary                 | Dallas ISD                    |
| 13. | Motley Elementary                           | Mesquite ISD                  |
| 14. | Frances E Norton Elementary                 | Allen ISD                     |
| 15. | Country Place Elementary                    | Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD |
| 16. | Bolin Elementary School<br>Cottonwood Creek | Allen ISD                     |
| 17. | Elementary                                  | Coppell ISD                   |
| 18. | Hickey Elementary School                    | Plano ISD                     |
| 19. | North Euless Elementary                     | Hurst-Euless-Bedford ISD      |
| 20. | Daggett Montessori                          | Fort Worth ISD                |

**Top 20 Middle Schools**

- |     |                                      |                    |
|-----|--------------------------------------|--------------------|
| 1.  | George B. Dealey Middle              | Dallas ISD         |
| 2.  | Dallas Environmental Science Academy | Dallas ISD         |
| 3.  | William B. Travis Middle             | Dallas ISD         |
| 4.  | Irma Rangel Young Women's            | Dallas ISD         |
| 5.  | Henry W. Longfellow Acad.            | Dallas ISD         |
| 6.  | Harry Stone Montessori               | Dallas ISD         |
| 7.  | C.M. Rice Middle                     | Plano ISD          |
| 8.  | Coppell Middle East                  | Coppell ISD        |
| 9.  | Coppell Middle West                  | Coppell ISD        |
| 10. | Schimelpfenig Middle                 | Plano ISD          |
| 11. | Clark Middle School                  | Frisco ISD         |
| 12. | George Dawson Middle                 | Carroll ISD        |
| 13. | Lone Oak Middle                      | Lone Oak ISD       |
| 14. | North Hills School                   | North Hills School |

Harmony Science Academy

15. (Fort Worth)

Harmony Science Academy (Fort Worth)

- 16. Sunnyvale Middle
- 17. Coppell Middle North
- 18. Krum Middle
- 19. Wester Middle School
- 20. Forestwood Middle

- Sunnyvale ISD
- Coppell ISD
- Krum ISD
- Frisco ISD
- Lewisville ISD

Top 20 high schools

- School of Science & Engineering
- 1. School for the Talented & Gifted
- 2. North Hills School
- 3. Highland Park High School
- 4. School of Government/Law/ Law Enforcement
- 5. Fort Worth Academy of Fine Arts
- 6. School of Health Professions
- 7. Coppell High School
- 8. School of Business & Management
- 9. Booker T. Washington School
- 10. for Performing Arts
- 11. School of Education & Social Services
- 12. Argyle High School
- 13. Colleyville Heritage
- 14. Grapevine High School
- 15. Flower Mound High School
- 16. Marcus High School
- 17. Allen High School
- 18. Keller High School
- 19. McKinney North High School

- Dallas ISD
- Dallas ISD
- North Hills School
- Highland Park ISD
- Dallas ISD
- FW Academy of Fine Arts
- Dallas ISD
- Coppell ISD
- Dallas ISD
- Dallas ISD
- Dallas ISD
- Dallas ISD
- Argyle ISD
- Grapevine-Colleyville ISD
- Grapevine-Colleyville ISD
- Lewisville ISD
- Lewisville ISD
- Allen ISD
- Keller ISD
- McKinney ISD

## 20. McKinney High School

McKinney ISD

Note: The high school rankings did not include several notable campuses, including many high schools in Frisco, McKinney, Plano, Richardson and Southlake Carroll. Schools were left out of the ratings if they were newer campuses, have used uncommon grade configurations in the last several years or had incomplete data for other reasons.

### How they did it

Children at Risk ranked more than 5,900 schools statewide. In North Texas, 807 elementary schools, 292 middle schools and 158 high schools were ranked.

For each group of schools, Children at Risk calculated a composite score computed from information collected mostly from the Texas Education Agency. Data in up to 14 categories were included from the most recent year available, 2007 or 2008. Schools that did not have all measures available were not rated.

### High school measures

- Percentage of 11th-grade students who achieved "Texas Success Initiative" standard, a college readiness standard set higher than the passing rate, on the English language arts and math Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) tests
- Percentage of 11th-graders who passed the exit-level social studies and science TAKS
- Percentage of graduates who took the ACT or SAT exams
- Average score for students taking the SAT
- Average score for students taking the ACT
- Percentage of 11th- and 12th-graders who took at least one Advanced Placement or International Baccalaureate examination
- Percentage of students who took one or more AP or IB exams and scored at or above the criterion score
- Percentage of students who completed and received credit for at least one advanced course or dual enrollment class in grades 9-12
- Average class size
- Percentage of graduates who satisfied the course requirements for the state's recommended high school curriculum
- A four-year, same-school graduation rate calculated by Children at Risk
- Percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunches or other public assistance. Schools with high poverty rates are weighted higher because they face greater challenges educating students.

### Middle school measures

- TAKS exam passing rates for: eighth-grade reading and math, science, social studies and performance on all tests; seventh-grade writing

- Average class size in English and language arts

- Attendance rates

- Percentage economically disadvantaged

Elementary measures

- TAKS exam passing rates for: fifth-grade reading, math, science and performance on all tests; fourth-grade writing

- Average class size for fifth grade

- Attendance rates

- Percentage economically disadvantaged