School rankings highlight challenges

In Houston's public schools, the distance between the top and the bottom is vast.

Copyright 2013: Houston Chronicle | April 25, 2013



Photo By Melissa Phillip/Staff

Gresia Nunez, 12,from left, Brianna Ward, 12, and Patrice Stubblefield, 11, work in their sixth grade geography class at Wharton Dual Language Academy.

This year's annual school report card, recently released by Children at Risk ("Houston's learning curve," B1, April 21), once again shows the enormous difference between our area's top public schools and its bottom ones. Our best are among the best in the nation (a fact conveniently confirmed, in the same week, by [U.S. News](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=opinion%2Feditorials&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22U.S.+News%22) and World Report's latest rankings). But our worst schools are shameful.

Significantly, every one of our area's top ten high schools - [DeBakey High School for Health Professions](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=opinion%2Feditorials&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22DeBakey+High+School+for+Health+Professions%22) ([HISD](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=opinion%2Feditorials&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22HISD%22)), Carnegie Vanguard (HISD), [Eastwood Academy](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=opinion%2Feditorials&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Eastwood+Academy%22) (HISD), Kerr (Alief), KIPP Houston (KIPP), YES Prep Southwest (YES), [East Early College](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=opinion%2Feditorials&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22East+Early+College%22) (HISD), [High School for the Performing](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=opinion%2Feditorials&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22High+School+for+the+Performing%22) and Visual Arts (HISD), [Challenge Early College](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=opinion%2Feditorials&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Challenge+Early+College%22)(HISD) and YES Prep North Central (YES) - is a charter or magnet school, a school that families had to seek out actively. The system provides an A& education for families of all races and income levels - but only if they're able to navigate the tricky business of choosing and enrolling in a good public school.

Our hearts sink when we think of the kids stuck in schools that Children at Risk flunked. The worst of the worst - the 14 high schools that earned Fs - aren't necessarily the schools with the most low-income or minority students. [Stratford High School](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=opinion%2Feditorials&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Stratford+High+School%22) (Spring Branch ISD), with 28.3 percent low-income students, took home a respectable [B. But Santa Fe High School](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=opinion%2Feditorials&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22B.+But+Santa+Fe+High+School%22) ([Santa Fe ISD](http://www.chron.com/?controllerName=search&action=search&channel=opinion%2Feditorials&search=1&inlineLink=1&query=%22Santa+Fe+ISD%22)), with 22 percent low-income students, took home a big, stinking F. Still, it is depressingly unsurprising that most of the lowest-performing schools serve chiefly low-income, minority students.

Public schools ought to level the playing field. But these schools don't come anywhere close.

Notably, our area's biggest school district, HISD, has more than its share of both the very best and very worst schools: Eight that earned A's, and eight that earned F's. In a way, that's understandable: HISD offers more choices than most school districts, and naturally, when families have choices, they tend to choose high-performing schools and leave low-performing ones behind. Schools that provide what families need, flourish. And schools that don't, wither.

If the system worked better, the low-performing schools that aren't chosen would simply close. But neighborhoods, school employees and alumni almost always hate to see a school closed, no matter how empty its classrooms or how wretched a job it's doing. It takes an awful lot of political willpower to put kids' needs first.

Why, in a district with so many good schools, do some families still enroll their kids in awful ones? Many families simply don't know that they have other, better options.

There's no fast, easy way to research all of a student's possible public-school options (charters, magnets, inter-district transfers, intra-district transfers).

In a better world, each year the state would mail every student's family a list of all the options within a reasonable range of their home, along with information about the schools' performance, transportation options, special programs and application procedures and deadlines. Picking a school will probably never be easy - for every student, there are a thousand factors to consider - but it could and should be much easier than it is now.

The state also needs to take faster, stronger action against schools that consistently fail to do their jobs. We're fans of the Recovery School District model that's working well in New Orleans and Tennessee: Families are given more power and clear choices. In New Orleans, test scores have soared.

Every kid deserves an A+ school.