

# East Texas Review



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## LONESTAR STATE



### Study outlines "best practices" in math, science

by Mark Lavergne/LSR

A look at the Texas high schools rated most proficient in math and science indicates there may be more to their success than simply putting money where mouths are.

In fact, says the Texas Public Policy Foundation (TPPF) study, a school's success in teaching math and science may mean spending less — almost a thousand dollars less per student.

The study, made public Nov. 2, looked at schools' level of improvement and at absolute scores from the SAT, ACT, Advanced Placement, and Texas Acquired Knowledge and Skills tests. From there TPPF identified the 39 public high schools that performed highest in math (28), science (29), or both (18).

What do these cream-of-the-crop institutions look like? TPPF found some interesting facts, and called on other schools in Texas to mimic their practices.

They're plenty diverse. While there are per-capita slightly fewer Hispanics in best practice schools, there are more Asians, and more African-Americans, and fewer whites. The high-performers have a smaller percentage of economically disadvantaged students—44 percent vs.56 in the state as a whole.

They spare expense... on expendable things. The typical public school in Texas spends \$7,229 per student annually. The 39 best practicing schools on average spent \$6,235—some \$994 less per student per year. High schools typically spend more per student than the average public school in Texas. Story said. And the 18 schools that took the cake in both math and science spent even less—\$5,853.

Even though best-practicing schools spend less money per student, they put a higher percentage of the money toward things that will actually benefit them.

The study says Texas public schools should focus their money on instruction.

Classes are bigger. Many of the state's teacher organizations have often argued that the state's classrooms should have fewer students — which of course means more teachers, and thus more state appropriations. But the best performers in math and science seem to indicate otherwise. Whereas the state's average high school math class size is 20.3, at high performing math schools it's 22.1. In science the state average is 21.5, at the high performing schools 23.5.

How can students in larger classes perform better than students in smaller ones? Maybe it has something to do with ...Teachers. "While the debate on class size is still running," the report says, "there is no question that the most important school-related factor in student achievement is teacher quality."

Average teacher experience in the 39 best-practicing schools is 13.3 years, compared to the state average of 11.5.

Generally, throughout the state, teachers not certified to teach math or science are often called on to do so. "Out-of-field" teaching describes when a teacher certified in one subject matter is assigned to teach in another.

Out-of-field teaching has become a common Band-aid for the shortage of math and science teachers. About 14 percent of math teachers across the state are out-of-field, vs. 3.8 percent in the top performing schools. Not only are nearly all of them certified, but some 59 percent of them have bachelor's degrees in mathematics. Moreover, 20 percent of the teachers have prior experience in business, accounting, engineering, or the oil and gas industry.

More startlingly, 95 percent of science teachers in the top performing schools have bachelor's degrees in science. In the state, 28 percent of those teaching science are doing so out-of-field, compared to less than one percent of teachers in the top performers. Thirty-four percent have experience in science-related fields.

And yes, the high performers pay their teachers. The Texas average in 2005-06 was \$41,744. Average in the top 39 was \$45,008. Even taking into account the additional average years of experience among the teachers from the top schools, they still get paid more at every level of experience.

"These schools have decided that the trade-off is worth it to have a little bit larger class sizes," Terry said, "but also they pay their teachers more."

Terry argued that if teachers were offered \$4,000 or \$5,000 extra per year for 10 percent more kids, they would take it.

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Other top schools allow parents, and students, to set a trigger on their wireless devices to receive a text message if their grades slip below a certain point. The study calls on schools to consider real-time, online grade-checking programs for parents and students.

The level of parental involvement is not that surprising considering seven of the top-performing schools are schools of choice—no charters, but several magnets. Ten other schools allowed some other form of choice, the report said.

Also unsurprising was the acute lack of discipline problems among the student body—especially, Story said, among the schools of choice. The report calls for the creation of more schools of choice focusing on math and science and related fields.

TPPF also recommended the Legislature lift the cap on charter schools, and remove the statewide minimum salary schedule for teachers, making it more performance based. They also recommended immediate implementation of TPPF's recommendations.

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