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State rates school districts

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By **Andy Ross**
Killeen Daily Herald

In a precursor to expected close study of the public education sector in the Texas Legislature next year, a new comptroller's office report released this week focuses on the relationship between kindergarten through 12th-grade spending and student performance.

The report, called "Connecting the Dots: School Spending and Student Progress," uses a method of rating school districts developed at the request of the Legislature in 2009.

Several educational statistics and recommendations are examined in the report. A central feature is the Financial Allocation Study for Texas (FAST) ratings.

The ratings range from one star to five stars and were determined after grouping districts into similar "peer groups," then comparing student academic progress with a spending index. In order to earn five stars, a district must combine "very high" student progress with a "very low" spending index.

The Killeen Independent School District came out with an overall three-star FAST rating and "high" spending index classification.

Looking at individual KISD schools, the academic progress percentiles varied. Every campus in the district, excluding Ellison High School, received either a "high" or "very high" spending index mark.

The index was developed by comparing schools' operating expenditures per student with those seen in other districts within KISD's peer group. EHS was the only KISD secondary school to receive three stars.

Harker Heights High School received a "very high" spending index and a 1½-star FAST rating; Shoemaker High School a "very high" spending index and two-star FAST rating; Killeen High School a "high" spending index and a 2½-star FAST rating.

KISD Superintendent Robert Muller had not had a chance to examine the report in detail by press time Wednesday, according to district spokeswoman Leslie Gilmore.

Texas Comptroller Susan Combs officially released the report during a news conference Wednesday in Dallas. The comptroller also highlighted a steady increase in public education spending over the past decade — most notably the fact that K-12 schools currently receive around 44 percent of Texas' general revenue.

"We all want students to excel academically, and it takes a certain amount of spending to realize that goal, but what is the right amount?" Combs said in an adjoining release. "We need to fully understand the relationship between progress and spending."

In addition to the Connecting the Dots report, a new opinion poll survey on post-secondary education spending was released by the Texas Public Policy Foundation this week.

The foundation said in a news release Monday the survey found 80 percent of Texas voters polled believed the state's colleges and universities can be run more efficiently. The survey also found 71 percent of voters believed teaching in post-secondary institutions can be improved at the same time that operating costs are reduced.

"Texas voters want more value and higher quality teaching for the tax dollars they pay to support higher education," said Justin Keener, TPPF vice president of policy and communications. "The results give lawmakers and university officials clear marching orders for how Texans want them to address budget shortfalls and rising tuition costs: Put our students first and cut higher education overhead."

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