

The Best Texas High Schools in 2005

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Earlier this month, Newsweek magazine released its biannual rankings of the "best" high schools in the nation. This report discusses the critical role that public education plays in our nation's health and future, an issue that is undisputable. In an effort to bring attention to the high schools that are achieving high levels of performance, Newsweek developed a measure of performance, based on the number of advanced placement and international baccalaureate tests administered by the high school. Newsweek argues that, although this measure is not the best measure of performance, a school's ability to prepare students for college is a key indicator of success.

What Newsweek fails to consider is the differences between high schools, specifically with respect to the resources available to the school. Although wealthy schools should still be commended for high levels of performance, it is easy to argue that the "best" high schools are those schools that do the most with what they have. Not controlling for the school's wealth ignores the fact that schools with more money often have more opportunities to offer the "high-end" opportunities to their students. The real heroes of the public school system are those high schools who can take students from all types of backgrounds and use their resources, though often lacking, to provide the best education possible.

This study offers a more scientific approach to ranking Texas high schools. We agree that college-readiness is an appropriate measure of high school performance, and we are able to take advantage of the data available on Texas high schools to develop a better measure of performance. Additionally, we have the capability to take into account the large disparities in wealth and resources faced by Texas schools. We use our methodology to rank our state's high schools and compare our rankings to Newsweek's results.

A Better Measure of Performance

Whereas the Newsweek study is only able to incorporate the number of advanced placement and international baccalaureate (AP/IB) tests administered by the district, we use a five-indicator measure of performance that offers a more well-rounded view of college readiness, is better crafted to evaluate Texas schools, and allows for districts to excel in a number of ways. This measure of performance includes the factors that are necessary for attending college, and three measures of how well students are prepared for college-level work. The full performance grade includes a school's graduation rate, their TAKS pass rate, the number of students whose SAT/ACT scores indicate college readiness (a standard defined by the state), the percentage of students taking AP/IB courses, and the percentage of students passing AP/IB tests. This measure offers much more than the Newsweek standard. Instead of considering the number of tests administered by the school, which can be skewed by a handful of students taking a number of AP classes, this indicator considered how many of a school's students have access to AP/IB classes, along with the other factors that the state and the education community use to evaluate performance.

We use statistical analysis (multivariate regression) to incorporate a number of controls, in an effort to identify those school districts who "do more with less." We use a number of wealth indicators, including per pupil instructional expenditures, average teacher salary, student-teacher ratios, average teacher experience, and the percentage of students in the school who are economically disadvantaged. The education literature shows that these factors strongly affect school performance. Because we are interested in the *school's* ability to educate the students, and not the indirect effects of school wealth, these controls are necessary.

Findings

Comparing our rankings to the Newsweek rankings resulted in mixed findings. In Newsweek's top 1036 schools, 92 schools are in Texas. We reranked the Texas schools first using Newsweek's ranking. This means that although the Science and Engineering Magnet School in Dallas ranked sixth in the nation, it was the top school in the state of Texas. Collapsing Newsweek national rankings into just a Texas list gives us the ability to compare their rankings with rankings based on new data. We then computed the new rankings based on the new measures of performance and the economic controls.

When comparing the top 25 schools in the Newsweek rankings with the top 25 in our rankings, we see a number of similarities and a few critical differences.

[See Table One]

Thirteen high schools rank in the top 25 of both lists, with Dallas ISD's School of Science and Engineering and South Texas ISD's Science Academy remaining the top three. We expected that the lists would be somewhat similar, as they both look to measure college readiness, but we can see the limitations of Newsweek's data when we look at the movement in the ranks. Eight of the schools in Newsweek's top 25 do not even make it into the TEEP top 50. Some fall even further down the list. For example, Newsweek ranks WT White High School sixth in the state and 77th in the nation. However, when we look at all indicators we see that only 24% of their students achieve at or above the "college ready" score on the SAT (1110), and only 36% of their students have access to AP classes. Although their graduation rates and TAKS pass rates are not necessarily bad, at 83% and 85%, respectively, they are not among the highest in the state.

Diamond Hill - Jarvis High School offers another example. DH-J ranks 22nd among Texas high schools on the Newsweek list, but other indicators tell a different story. With a TAKS pass rate of 39% and only 3% of students scoring above the college-ready standard on the SAT or ACT, Diamond Hill-Jarvis is not leading the pack in college readiness. Additionally, we see other schools that, when we control for school district wealth, also drop in the rankings, though not as substantially. Highland Park falls from 2nd to 6th, and Grapevine HS falls from 7th to 45th.

But that's not the most important story. We believe that the most important findings are the schools that, despite low budgets and large populations of disadvantaged

students, seem to make it work. We use our measure to rank our top 25 in the state of Texas.

[See Table Two]

Six high schools, who did not make it into Newsweek top 100, rate among the top 25 high schools in the state, when we employed this better measure of performance. Dallas ISD's School for the Talented and Gifted rank #1, posting incredible performance scores for graduation rates (100%), high SAT/ACT scores (80%), and the percentage of students taking AP classes (94%). Likewise, Carnegie Vanguard High School in the Houston school district rates 7th in our list, achieving above average performance with 63% of students taking AP classes and 60% of students receiving high SAT/ACT scores. Of special note is PSJA Memorial High School in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district which, despite serious limitations in resources and a large limited English and low income student population, still performs above the average in graduation rates, and success on the AP. Other high schools ranking on our top 25 are Hidalgo HS, Medina HS, and Presidio HS.

The Texas Educational Excellence Project is also concerned with the education of our state's minority student populations. In an effort to offer some additional information, our organization also replicated this research to construct indicators of the African American and Latino student performance in Texas high schools. We then ranked high schools separately, creating a list of the best high schools for African American and the best high schools for Latinos.

[See Tables Three and Four]

Again, many high schools still remain at the top, but we also see new names, such as Randolph High School, which posted above-average scores for both African American and Latino student achievement. Given the large minority populations in our state, considering how achievement differs among minority student groups is critical in our evaluation of educational performance.

Overall, we find that many of our state's top schools are high achievers, no matter how you measure performance. However, using a more holistic view of what it means to make students "college ready," while also controlling for the critical differences in a school's resources, allows us to get a better view of what our schools are doing to serve Texas students.

More information, including extended rankings and a detailed discussion of methodology, can be found on our website at <http://teep.tamu.edu/rankings>. Any questions or comments are welcome at (979) 458-0104 or dhawes@politics.tamu.edu.

Table 1. Newsweek's Top 25 Texas High Schools

Newsweek's Rankings	TEEP Rankings	High School	School District
1	3	School of Science & Engineering	Dallas ISD
2	6	Highland Park High School	Highland Park ISD
3	2	The Science Academy	South Texas ISD
4	8	Westlake High School	Eanes ISD
5	13	Westwood High School	Round Rock ISD
6	363	W T White High School	Dallas ISD
7	45	Grapevine High School	Grapevine-Colleyville ISD
8	60	Colleyville Heritage High School	Grapevine-Colleyville ISD
9	19	Bellaire High School	Houston ISD
10	11	Memorial High School	Spring Branch ISD
11	37	Paschal High School	Fort Worth ISD
12	10	High School for Health Professions	South Texas ISD
13	4	Johnson High School	Austin ISD
14	5	DeBakey H.S. for Health Professions	Houston ISD
15	14	Garland High School	Garland ISD
16	15	Plano West Senior High School	Plano ISD
17	68	Lanier High School	Austin ISD
18	234	New Braunfels High School	New Braunfels ISD
19	65	Stratford High School	Spring Branch ISD
20	31	Carroll Senior High School	Carroll ISD
21	62	Coppell High School	Coppell ISD
22	602	Diamond Hill-Jarvis High School	Fort Worth ISD
23	101	Hillcrest High School	Dallas ISD
24	12	Anderson High School	Austin ISD
25	28	McKinney High School	McKinney ISD

Table 2. TEEP Top 25 Texas High Schools

TEEP Rankings	Newsweek's Rankings	High School	School District
1	NR	School for the Talented & Gifted	Dallas ISD
2	3	The Science Academy	South Texas ISD
3	1	School of Science & Engineering	Dallas ISD
4	13	Johnson High School	Austin ISD
5	14	DeBakey H.S. for Health Professions	Houston ISD
6	2	Highland Park High School	Highland Park ISD
7	NR	Carnegie Vanguard Hs	Houston ISD
8	4	Westlake High School	Eanes ISD
9	58	McCallum High School	Austin ISD
10	12	High School for Health Professions	South Texas ISD
11	10	Memorial High School	Spring Branch ISD
12	24	Anderson High School	Austin ISD
13	5	Westwood High School	Round Rock ISD
14	15	Garland High School	Garland ISD
15	16	Plano West Senior High School	Plano ISD
16	41	Alamo Heights High School	Alamo Heights ISD
17	32	Austin High School	Austin ISD
18	31	Health Careers High School	Northside ISD
19	9	Bellaire High School	Houston ISD
20	NR	Hidalgo High School	Hidalgo ISD
21	NR	PSJA Memorial High School	Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD
22	33	A&M Consolidated High School	College Station ISD
23	NR	Medina High School	Medina ISD
24	NR	Presidio High School	Presidio ISD
25	38	Performance & Visual Arts High School	Houston ISD

NR = Not Ranked by Newsweek

Table 3. Top 25 Texas High Schools (African-American Achievement)

African-American Rankings	High School	School District
1	School for the Talented & Gifted	Dallas ISD
2	DeBakey H.S. for Health Professions	Houston ISD
3	School of Science & Engineering	Dallas ISD
4	Bel Air High School	Ysleta ISD
5	Burges High School	El Paso ISD
6	Anderson High School	Austin ISD
7	Clements High School	Fort Bend ISD
8	Pearce High School	Richardson ISD
9	Milby High School	Houston ISD
10	Austin High School	El Paso ISD
11	Rockwall High School	Rockwall ISD
12	Performing & Visual Arts High School	Houston ISD
13	Southwest High School	Southwest ISD
14	Gregory-Portland High School	Gregory-Portland ISD
15	Randolph High School	Randolph Field ISD
16	Pewitt High School	Pewitt ISD
17	Reagan High School	North East ISD
18	San Marcos High School	San Marcos Cons ISD
19	Americas High School	Socorro ISD
20	Eastwood High School	Ysleta ISD
21	Alvin High School	Alvin ISD
22	Cedar Park High School	Leander ISD
23	Robinson High School	Robinson ISD
24	Creekview High School	Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISD
25	McCallum High School	Austin ISD

Table 4. Top 25 Texas High Schools (Latino Achievement)

Latino Rankings	High School	School District
1	School for the Talented & Gifted	Dallas ISD
2	DeBakey H.S. for Health Professions	Houston ISD
3	School Of Science & Engineering	Dallas ISD
4	The Science Academy	South Texas ISD
5	Dunbar High School	Fort Worth ISD
6	Westlake High School	Eanes ISD
7	High School for Health Professions	South Texas ISD
8	Johnson High School	Austin ISD
9	Carroll Senior High School	Carroll ISD
10	Iowa Park High School	Iowa Park Cons ISD
11	Presidio High School	Presidio ISD
12	Westwood High School	Round Rock ISD
13	Texas High School	Texarkana ISD
14	Wylie High School	Wylie ISD
15	Carnegie Vanguard Hs	Houston ISD
16	Forney High School	Forney ISD
17	Hidalgo High School	Hidalgo ISD
18	Health Careers High School	Northside ISD
19	PSJA Memorial High School	Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD
20	Gonzalo Garza Independence H.S.	Austin ISD
21	Anderson High School	Austin ISD
22	Iraan High School	Iraan-Sheffield ISD
23	Flower Mound High School	Lewisville ISD
24	Liberty Hill High School	Liberty Hill ISD
25	Plano Sr. High School	Plano ISD