

Dropout and Retention Rates Soar in Texas' Virtual Schools

Texas' full-time virtual school students are **five times** as likely to be retained and **five times** as likely to drop out as students in public schools, state education agency data show.

As they did in 2015-16, the state's two largest virtual schools -- Texas Connections Academy and Texas Virtual Academy -- both failed again to meet state standards in 2016-17. Of the nearly 9,400 students enrolled in full-time, state-funded virtual schools in Texas evaluated under standard accountability requirements, 86 percent were enrolled in one of these two schools. Despite these poor performance indicators, overall enrollment virtual schools increased more than 10 percent.

Texas Connections Academy, which enrolls more students than any other public school campus in the state, is now in its third consecutive year of "Improvement Required" status. Responsive Ed Virtual Learning, which failed to meet standards four of the last five years, is in its second year. In 2015-16, Responsive Ed opened a new full-time virtual high school "campus," named Premier High School, which is evaluated under the state's alternative accountability system, which is intended only for at-risk students. It is the only virtual campus evaluated under this system.

Full-Time Virtual School Accountability Ratings by School Year

	2010-11	2011-12	2012-13	2013-14	2014-15	2015-16	2016-17
TEXAS CONNECTIONS ACADEMY (Houston ISD) Opened 2006	Improvement Required	No rating assigned by the TEA	Met Standard	Met Standard	Improvement Required	Improvement Required Enrollment: 5,106	Improvement Required Enrollment: 5,931
IQ ACADEMY/TEXAS VIRTUAL ACADEMY/ RESPONSIVE ED VIRTUAL LEARNING (Responsive Ed Charter) Opened 2009	Met Standard	No rating assigned by the TEA	Improvement Required	Improvement Required	Met Standard	Improvement Required Enrollment: 3,324	Improvement Required Enrollment: 3,419
				PREMIER HS - TEXAS VIRTUAL ACADEMY (Responsive Ed Charter) Opened 2015		Met Standard** Enrollment: 2,729	Met Standard** Enrollment: 2,980

* Indicates voluntary closure by provider

** Rated under the Alternative Education Accountability (AEA) System

Safeguarding Texas Students

- ✓ **Performance:** The larger full-time programs have failed to meet state accountability standards. The Walton Foundation-funded study echoed those concerns nationally.
- ✓ **Transparency:** Parents tend to interact with the full-time programs through the vendor's websites, sometimes unaware of the district or charter in which their children are enrolled. The vendor's websites are also not required to notify parents of performance of the vendor before enrolling the student.
- ✓ **Accountability:** Full-time vendors are not held accountable to the state for student performance. In some instances, vendors have been able to move between LEAs in a manner that defeats longitudinal accountability measures like dropout or completion measures. Some vendors have migrated to the alternative accountability system in a manner that may not be appropriate.
- ✓ **Waivers:** The agency has used its waiver authority to both increase the number of full-time programs and facilitate the transfer of parts of programs to additional LEAs. That flexibility should be limited until full-time virtual programs are performing at an appropriate level.
- ✓ **Better existing programs:** Both Texas Tech and UT-Austin operate full-time virtual programs on a tuition basis. There were discussions last session to allow these programs access to FSP funding for Texas resident students.

Dismal performance continues

Since 2010, three virtual schools have closed and many continue to underperform.

Data from 2015-16 show that at every grade level, grade retention was substantially higher in virtual programs than it was in brick and mortars. More than one-third of all ninth graders in virtual schools were retained compared to 9 percent statewide. In some grades, virtual students were as much as 12 times more likely to be retained than other students in Texas public schools.

Grade Level	Full Time Virtual			Texas Total		
	Students	Retained	Rate	Students	Retained	Rate
03	346	18	5.2	402,923	6,153	1.5
04	554	21	3.8	390,665	2,986	0.8
05	658	35	5.3	386,458	1,784	0.5
06	943	65	6.9	384,254	2,186	0.6
07	1,363	99	7.3	385,723	2,784	0.7
08	1,544	105	6.8	381,456	2,111	0.6
09	1,895	706	37.3	411,132	37,091	9.0
10	1,436	332	23.1	370,983	21,851	5.9
11	1,155	181	15.7	330,133	13,755	4.2
12	864	104	12.0	335,861	14,975	4.5
Total 3-12	10,758	1,666	15.5	3,779,588	105,676	2.8

Students attending virtual high schools from 2012 to 2016 were half as likely to have graduated within four years as students at other public schools across the state and five times as likely to have dropped out.

2015-2016 Federal Graduates for Texas Full-time Virtual Students versus the State Average

	Graduated	Continued	Received GED	Dropped Out
Texas Connections Academy	47.22%	13.41%	4.56%	34.81%
Texas Virtual Academy (combined)	42.83%	26.94%	5.01%	25.22%
Total Virtual	45.23%	19.53%	4.77%	30.47%
State	89.14%	4.21%	0.49%	6.16%

Data on students who attended virtual high school campuses in 2012 show about 40 percent transferred to another school before graduating in 2016 compared to 13 percent in Houston ISD. Of virtual students in the class of 2016 who remained enrolled or transferred-in/remained all four years 54 percent either dropped out or reported that they began homeschooling compared to 12 percent in HISD. Only 25 percent earned a GED or graduated compared to 69 percent in HISD.

Class of 2016 Graduation Summary Data

	Texas Connections Academy	Texas Virtual Academy	Total Virtual	Houston ISD
2013 Ninth Graders	298	637	935	12,685
Transfers Out	-125	-239	-364	-1,749
Transfers In	1,047	893	1,940	2,499
Revised Cohort	1,220	1,291	2,511	13,435
Graduated	27.21%	19.21%	23.10%	68.89%
Began Homeschooling	30.41%	44.77%	37.79%	1.34%
Enrolled in Private School	3.36%	3.87%	3.62%	4.61%
Moved out of State / Country*	7.70%	6.43%	7.05%	6.77%
Earned GED*	2.70%	2.32%	2.51%	0.31%
Continued	7.70%	12.08%	9.96%	6.47%
Dropped Out	20.00%	11.31%	15.53%	10.89%
Other	0.90%	0.00%	0.44%	0.71%

*Where masking occurred, numbers were treated as the maximum allowed value, so if TEA reported fewer than 5, 5 was used. If TEA reported fewer than 10, 10 was used, etc.

Blended Learning is a Better Way

Technology plays an important role in facilitating student learning in the 21st century. Blended learning moves beyond merely providing opportunities for online learning, and, instead, presents a more strategic, student-centered approach. Blended learning takes place when students learn at least in part online, with some element of student control over the time, place, path, and/or pace of their learning, while also enjoying the benefits that come with education at a brick-and-mortar school (*Christensen Institute*).

Blended learning is personalized, tailored to an individual student's particular needs, and competency-based, enabling students to advance after mastering a given subject. Integrating blended learning into schools allows students to benefit from customized learning experiences through the use of adaptive digital content and increased one-on-one time with teachers.

