

Austin graduation rates must improve

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The Austin school district presents a rosier picture of student graduation rates than a national study released this week. Austin officials put the district graduation rate at 77.3 percent, meaning that roughly three of four high school students graduate in four years. But a national study by the respected Editorial Projects in Education Inc., publisher of Education Week, recorded a much lower graduation rate for Austin schools - 58.2 percent. Conflicting graduation rates are confusing, but the Austin district makes a good case why its data are more accurate.

We are more inclined to accept Austin's graduation rates because the data used in the national study, based on 2004 graduation rates, is outdated. Editorial Projects in Education used a formula that didn't adjust for students moving into private schools, moving out of state or entering home schooling.

Austin doesn't have comparable figures for that year because its 80 percent graduation rate for 2004 was significantly inflated by the way the Texas Education Agency calculated dropout and graduation rates then. Until a year ago, the state agency and districts kept dropout rates artificially low with a selective system of reporting that was found to be misleading. For instance, students who dropped out but said they were enrolling in other districts were not counted as dropouts even if they never enrolled in a new district.

Students pursuing (but not necessarily earning) a General Educational Development (GED) certificate weren't counted as dropouts. Neither were students who failed the required Texas Assessment of Academic Skills exit exams if they said they were going to continue taking courses to pass. Many of those students lacked requirements to graduate.

Many districts wrongly focused on "completion" rates, meaning that they counted students who completed four years of high school instead of the number of students who earned diplomas.

While not perfect, a new TEA reporting system provides a far more accurate look at the successes and failures of public schools in graduating students. And in Austin, that picture is both good and bad.

At Anderson and Bowie high schools, at least nine of 10 students graduate in four years and about 86 percent do the same at Austin High. But at Johnston, Reagan and Travis, just six of 10 graduate, while four of 10 drop out or fail to earn diplomas.

There are many reasons for the disparities, including that students tracking to Johnston, Reagan and Travis are entering ninth grade ill-prepared for high school work, pointing up problems in the middle schools. Absenteeism is a problem because students can't learn if they're not in school.

But as we've said before, the lack of experienced and well-qualified teachers in low-performing schools continues to be a huge factor in the reasons those schools are failing.

The abysmal graduation rates at some Austin schools present a challenge for school trustees and the new superintendent. No matter whose figures are right, there is something terribly wrong with this picture.

Graduating in Austin

Graduation rates for Austin school district high schools' Class of 2006, based on percentages that reflect the number of students who enter as ninth-graders and graduate in four years. The rate doesn't include students who earn a GED.

Bowie 93.4
Anderson 90.5
Austin 85.9
LBJ 83.3 Includes the Liberal Arts and Science Academy
McCallum 81.9
Crockett 80.1
Akins 77.2
Lanier 73.4
Travis 61.4
Reagan 60.1
Johnston 59.0

Starting over with state's young offenders

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Legislative leaders are seriously considering whether to abolish the Texas Youth Commission. Abolishment is a drastic step that deserves serious study - if the Legislature is serious about finding a better way to help troubled, especially dangerous, youths. A better way is not, "We can spend less state money on the commission and make somebody else pay for these kids."

For more than a year now the youth commission has struggled with the aftermath of revelations that some of its employees had been sexually involved with incarcerated youths, and that some in management either looked the other way or even suppressed efforts to confront the problem. The six members of the commission's oversight board were forced to resign, the executive director retired and new management began releasing a number of youths and cleaning house.

But trouble continued at the top. The youth commission is on its third conservator, a powerful position appointed to run a state agency that is, in effect, in managerial bankruptcy.

Another problem is low pay and the isolation of many commission facilities, which has made it difficult to keep enough guards employed.

State District Judge Jeanne Meurer, who oversees youth corrections in Travis County, has stopped sending all but a handful of youths to youth commission facilities because, she said, of the agency's lack of effective treatment.

State lawmakers are studying the fact that with 2,400 youths, some of them the most violent in the state, in the commission's custody and an annual budget of about \$240 million, the state is spending about \$100,000 per youth. It's doubtful Texas is getting its money's worth.

Sen. John Whitmire, D-Houston, is chairman of a special legislative committee that is tracking the youth commission. He and other lawmakers are thinking of a new agency that would take over custody of most dangerous offenders now held by the commission.

But most youths would be turned over to county-based programs, though perhaps under state oversight. If the state provides affected counties with more money to handle these youths, the net result might still be a savings to the state. And the approach in mind is not supposed to impose any new unfunded mandates on the counties.

There's a lot to be said for keeping as many youthful offenders close to home as possible. Judge Meurer says such closeness permits more effective treatment not just for the youths but for their families - if the state provides adequate funding, which, she said, is "a huge concern."

But state lawmakers representing rural areas that have commission facilities - places like Pyote, Crockett, Gainesville, Giddings and Brownwood - can be expected to resist any loss of local state jobs. The Legislature, though, must first consider what's in the best interest of youths in serious trouble.

Now is as good a time as any to consider whether, if the state were starting from scratch, it would create what it has now in the Texas Youth Commission. Something new might well be called for. But if the idea is simply to dump troubled youths on counties without the money to help them, don't bother.