



School reform in state's hands Education chief setting rules for local districts on spending, test scores THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS July 10, 2006 Monday

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HEADLINE: *School reform in state's hands Education chief setting rules for local districts on spending, test scores*

BYLINE: *TERRENCE STUTZ, Austin Bureau*

BODY:

*AUSTIN - Control over public **schools** is swinging back toward the state as **Texas'** education chief and her staff write a series of new rules regulating everything from how districts spend their tax dollars to how much student test scores must improve each year.*

*The rules are part of the massive **school** finance and education reform legislation passed by state lawmakers in last spring's special session. And while most of the attention was on the effort to cut local property taxes, the **Legislature** also ordered a long list of education changes that will affect every **school** campus and district in the state.*

The job of putting those in place will fall primarily to state Education Commissioner Shirley Neeley, who is working on nearly two dozen rules governing student achievement, merit pay for teachers and **school** district spending.

The rules would even empower Dr. Neeley to sweep teachers and administrators out of low-performing **schools** with limited input from local officials.

Legislative leaders say the changes are needed to get **schools** on the right track, while **school** officials worry about erosion of local control - a contrast to the state's landmark 1995 education reform law that emphasized less state regulation.

"There has to be a final word from someone, so we chose the commissioner of education" to implement the reforms, said Sen. Florence Shapiro, author of the new education law and chairwoman of the Senate Education Committee.

While **school** districts will come under a battery of new state regulations, Ms. Shapiro rejected the idea that local control of **schools** is being undermined.

"For the most part, they can still do whatever they want," the Plano Republican said. "They got more money and more flexibility in spending their money."

The new requirements, she added, are intended to "keep **Texas** on the forefront of the national education reform movement."

Dr. Neeley said she will seek input from **school** superintendents and major education groups, as well as the public, before she puts the new rules in place.

"It will be a very collaborative process," she said.

But many local **school** officials see a striking movement toward more state regulation of **schools**. As primary evidence, they cited the establishment of a new uniform start date for all public **schools** beginning in 2007. **School** superintendents have had wide discretion in setting their **school** calendars in the past.

'Too much power'

"There is a feeling among superintendents that the commissioner is getting too much power," said Clayton Downing, director of the **Texas School** Coalition and former superintendent of the Lewisville **school** district. "It's not that we don't trust Dr. Neeley, but we don't know who will be commissioner down the road."

Dr. Downing said that while the education and tax measures passed in May produced benefits for **school** districts, they also prompted superintendents to fear that local control of **schools** is

gradually being usurped.

*David Anderson, a consultant with Austin-based HillCo Partners and former curriculum director for the **Texas** Education Agency, said there is no doubt that state's top education official will become more powerful under the new law.*

*"It is perhaps the most significant shift of authority to the commissioner's office in the past 15 years," Mr. Anderson said. "Whenever more authority is placed with the commissioner and **Texas** Education Agency, there is some erosion of discretion and decision for **school** superintendents and local **school** boards."*

*Dr. Neeley, who did not request the new authority from the **Legislature**, said **school** districts will have ample time to prepare for the requirements.*

"Most superintendents are ready for a more rigorous instructional program and want to work to make this a win-win situation for our schoolchildren," she said.

Possible rules

Some of the rules being drafted by Dr. Neeley and the education agency would:

Set state benchmarks for annual improvement in student achievement, based on the **Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills. The agency will then report whether each student met, fell below or exceeded the expected level of improvement, with results provided to teachers and parents.*

Establish spending targets for each **school district based on data from campuses and districts found to be most efficient and effective. Spending targets would be set for instruction, central administration, district operations and any other category decided by the commissioner. **School** boards that exceed the targets must publicly defend their actions.*

Authorize the commissioner to set the requirements for paying out \$260 million in incentive pay for teachers and other **school employees. The program is touted as the largest incentive pay program for educators in the nation.*

*But the power to quickly intervene at **school** campuses or districts that have low ratings could be the most significant change in store.*

Campus intervention

*Under the new law, the commissioner can replace the entire staff at any campus that is rated academically **unacceptable** for two years in a row. A campus intervention team appointed by the commissioner would determine which employees would be removed, with the principal*

automatically removed. The team would run the campus until it was rated acceptable.

*The change begins with the recently completed 2005-06 **school** year. Although this year's ratings won't be out until next month, a total of 364 campuses - including 51 charter **schools** - were graded academically **unacceptable** a year ago. If similar numbers are poorly rated this year, thousands of teachers and principals could be replaced in summer 2007.*

*And if a campus continues to receive poor ratings for two years after state intervention, the commissioner must turn over management of the **school** to a nonprofit education entity or order closure of the **school**. The commissioner can take similar actions against a **school** district for multiple years of poor academic or financial ratings under the state's accountability system.*

*The changes signal a shift in power not only to the education commissioner, but also to the governor, who appoints the commissioner, said Richard Kouri of the **Texas State Teachers Association**. Dr. Neeley was appointed by Gov. Rick Perry.*

Local control shrinks

*"Things that were previously decided locally no longer will be," he said, citing another rule that empowers the commissioner to order a **school** district or campus to hire an outside professional to examine problems in finances, student testing, data quality, governance or learning programs.*

"The pendulum has swung pretty far in the direction of more state control over public education," he added.

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GRAPHIC: CHART(S): STATE'S SCHOOL CHIEF AND DUTIES.

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*The call for one way to rate schools grows louder; Many parents and educators are confused by conflicting U.S., Texas rankings The Houston Chronicle September 21, 2006 Thursday
Correction Appended*

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HEADLINE: The call for one way to rate **schools** grows louder;
Many parents and educators are confused by conflicting U.S., **Texas** rankings

BYLINE: ERICKA MELLON, Staff

BODY:

Tiffany Davis thought she had found the perfect **school** for her daughter. Pilgrim Elementary was fewer than three miles from her office, and on Aug. 1, the state declared it "exemplary" based on student test scores.

Davis was sold - until the state made another announcement less than three weeks later: Pilgrim Elementary failed to meet the academic demands of the federal No Child Left Behind Act. The acclaimed Houston Independent **School** District campus now bore a scarlet letter.

"What's going on?" Davis said she thought. "It was extremely confusing."

What's going on is that **Texas** has two systems for judging **schools** - one mandated by the state **Legislature** in 1993 and another ordered in 2002 by the federal No Child Left Behind Act, or NCLB.

And because each has its own ratings formula, nearly 8 percent of **Texas schools**, and more than 10 percent of those in Harris County, earned a passing grade under one of the systems but failed under the other, a Houston Chronicle analysis shows.

Each system is supposed to give the public a clear, data-based picture of how well **schools** are educating children. But, with two systems in **Texas** and a hodgepodge of formulas nationwide, parents are confused, educators are frustrated, and, now, a group of strange bedfellows wants

changes.

A growing concern

Several top education experts and politicians from both parties are calling for one set of national standards and corresponding national tests to evaluate the country's 96,000 or so public **schools**. Similar calls have come before, but they are getting louder as Congress gears up to review and reauthorize NCLB as early as next year.

"If we had a national accountability system, then we wouldn't have this confusion. Parents would have clear information," said Michael Petrilli, a vice president at the conservative Thomas B. Fordham Foundation, based in Washington, D.C.

The closest thing **schools** have to a national test is the National Assessment of Educational Progress, also called the Nation's Report Card. But that exam is only given to a sampling of students, and there are no consequences attached to it.

Petrilli, who served under then-U.S. Secretary of Education Rod Paige during President George W. Bush's first term, acknowledges his team faces an uphill battle to convince lawmakers that national standards and testing wouldn't stomp too hard on states' rights.

"It's still far from certain that anything would happen on this front," Petrilli said. "But it is being considered more seriously than it has in almost a decade."

Texas was model for feds

Texas was one of the first states to launch a standardized testing system to hold **schools** accountable for students' performance. And though the state's approach was a model for NCLB, the two differ in their details.

"The goals are identical in terms of increasing student performance and decreasing the gaps in performance between different student groups," said Criss Cloudt, an associate commissioner of the **Texas** Education Agency. However, she added, "Defining how we get there differs in the two systems."

What's even more confounding is that both the state and federal ratings in **Texas** use results from the same exam - the **Texas** Assessment of Knowledge and Skills - to draw conclusions that are sometimes in conflict.

The **Texas** system, for example, does not punish **schools** based on the test scores of special-education students or those who struggle to speak English. NCLB does. In addition, NCLB evaluates **schools** in reading and math only, while the state system also counts science and social studies.

Each has its own rating terminology, too. The state labels **schools** exemplary, recognized, acceptable or **unacceptable**. Under the federal system, **schools** either make "adequate yearly progress" or they don't.

More than one in 13 **schools** in **Texas** earned ratings that appear in conflict this year - meaning a **school** with a rating of acceptable or better failed to meet federal guidelines, or vice versa, preliminary results show.

More than one in 10 districts faced the same problem. In Harris County, the Houston, North Forest and Alief **school** systems each netted "acceptable" state ratings but didn't meet the federal standard.

HISD had about 16 percent of its **schools** in conflict. Superintendent Abelardo Saavedra said he doesn't worry much about the inconsistent ratings, though he prefers the longer-standing state system under which HISD fared the best.

"I'm not necessarily opposed to national standards and a national test. That probably is a better answer than what we have today," Saavedra said. "But it all comes back down to what we're doing in the classroom."

Advocates state their case

Advocates of national standards and national testing argue such measures are necessary to keep states from setting standards that are too easily met. They want students nationwide to learn the same concepts in reading, math and science.

Critics of the idea say the federal government has no business telling local **schools** exactly what to teach and how to test it

The Bush administration, which authored NCLB, likely won't fight for national standards and testing, according to a spokesman for the U.S. Department of Education.

"There's no push from the department on that," spokesman Chad Colby said. "The president has said he believes that education is the states' responsibility."

Politics aside, what should a parent do with **school** ratings, whether they are based on state rules, federal ones or even a unified system?

Gayle Fallon, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers, suggests looking at the data behind the labels.

"Once you get the rating, the next question is, 'Why?' " Fallon said. "In some cases, it's more

serious than others."

Fallon gave the same advice to Tiffany Davis, the concerned mother who works in her office. In the end, Pilgrim Elementary was full, Davis said, so she enrolled her daughter at Memorial Elementary, a state "recognized" **school** that also met the federal requirements. "I was trying to find a good **school**," she said.

State closes Johnston Austin American-Statesman (Texas) June 5, 2008 Thursday

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HEADLINE: State closes Johnston

BYLINE: Laura Heinauer AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

BODY:

When the last bell of the school year rang just after 1 p.m. Wednesday at **Johnston High School**, unbeknownst to students and staff, it tolled the end of the 47-year-old school itself.

The state, which has rated Johnston "academically unacceptable" for the past four years based on passing rates on state achievement tests and dropout rates, ordered the campus **closed** Wednesday for failing to meet standards for the fifth year. It is the first school to be **closed** under the state's accountability law.

The **Austin** school district plans to reopen the campus with a new name and new faculty members to serve a different mission. At least 50 percent of the students previously served at Johnston must be reassigned to other campuses and at least 75 percent of the teachers must also be reassigned, according to state law.

The outcome is what district officials and some local politicians, including Sen. **Kirk Watson**,

D-**Austin**, had been hoping for - one that allows the district to maintain control of the school and prevents the building from sitting empty. The state could have **closed** the campus without allowing it to reopen or put it under alternative management.

The district still has to come up with a plan for the 2008-09 school year that is acceptable to the state. Officials propose reopening with a heavy emphasis on individual instruction and career training. By the 2009-10 school year, Superintendent Pat Forgione said the campus could open with a technology program or with an early college start program with help from **Austin** Community College.

Although he has criticized proposals to close schools in the past, Forgione said he was "very pleased" with Wednesday's news.

"We're at the very edge " some might say the bleeding edge, of this law," Forgione said at a news conference that Watson also attended. Watson said that although he has several issues with the particulars of what could be a very "punitive" law, he was happy that the state and the **Austin** district came to an agreement that other schools in similar situations could use. Texas Education Agency officials said Houston's Sam Houston High School has been unacceptable for five years and also faces possible closure. Two other schools have been unacceptable for four years and also face closure.

Reached by phone, state Senate Education Committee Chairwoman Florence Shapiro, R-Plano , said, "I think this reconstitution is very creative, and I think it will be very helpful for the students as well as for the school."

But state Rep. Dawnna Dukes, D-**Austin** , said Wednesday in a statement that, "It is incumbent upon the Legislature to revisit the issue of automatic closure of schools " and to develop procedures to encourage and ensure all of our children, especially those who are disadvantaged, reach their full potential."

District officials said they didn't immediately know exactly how many Johnston students will be affected by the closure or to which schools students will be reassigned.

Of about 600 students enrolled at Johnston in the spring, 20 percent are graduating. About 50 percent of incoming freshmen from the Johnston attendance zone decided to go to other schools. Last year, trustees discussed possibly sending students to Reagan, LBJ, McCallum, Travis and **Austin** high schools if Johnston were **closed**.

District officials plan to meet with members of the Johnston community today at 5:30 p.m. at the campus, 1012 Arthur Stiles Road , to discuss the next steps. The school board will hear about plans for the campus at a meeting Monday .

School board President Mark Williams said trustees are committed to making a plan to

"repurpose" Johnston a success. "It's embarrassing to reach this point since we haven't changed, but change we must."

To stave off the state-ordered closure, Johnston students were required to improve in 16 categories on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills . Students came close, according to preliminary results released by district officials. They hit their marks in nearly every category . It also appeared that Johnston's "completion rate," a dropout rate, also fell short.

Education Commissioner Robert Scott said despite gains, the campus would again earn an "academically unacceptable" rating, the lowest, when state accountability ratings are issued Aug. 1.

"The closure of **Johnston High School** will be a challenge for the community that it serves, but my greatest concern is for each student's education. State law requires that the students assigned to Johnston be provided a more effective learning environment," Scott told **Austin** officials. Scott said **Pearce** Middle School in Northeast **Austin**, which has failed to meet standards for the fourth year, will remain open.

Place 2 **Austin** Trustee Sam Guzman , whose district includes Johnston, said "I want to be the first to invite Commissioner Scott to visit the newly repurposed **Johnston High School** in the fall. " Trustees and the Johnston community are committed to achieving greater things for our students."

Albert Sydney **Johnston High School**, named for a Confederate general buried in the Texas State Cemetery, opened its doors in 1960.

Johnston has struggled for years with high turnover among teachers and administrators - 11 principals in 12 years before Celina Estrada-Thomas came in 2005 - and dwindling enrollment. With about 650 students enrolled in the fall, Johnston was less than half full.

Estrada-Thomas, who is leaving the district to lead Bastrop High School, has walked neighborhood streets and knocked on doors to fight apathy at the school: Officials have reported that more than 600 of Johnston's 760 students had more than 10 unexcused absences in the 2006-07 school year - nearly 80 percent of students missed two weeks of class or more.

In Johnston's final hour, district officials praised students during a pizza party celebrating improvements made on the TAKS. Unaware of Scott's decision, students had decorated the campus with strands of bright silly string, colored foam and balloons.

Estrada-Thomas, before a bank of television news cameras at the school Wednesday evening, said, "The kids are probably finding out (about the closure) as they're listening to me now. I think it's really going to catch them off guard."

Johnston senior Jade Bradley, who is graduating Friday , said she was stunned to hear of her alma mater's fate.

"I'm so shocked by that. That's crazy. Wow," she said Wednesday evening. Bradley, who plans to attend Texas Tech University and major in math and computer science, said she's sad that she will be among the school's last graduates.

At a repurposed Johnston, she said, "everything is going to be different. It's not going to be the same."

Johnston parent Anna Jimenez graduated from the school in 1992. Her son Art will graduate Friday.

"It's hard to accept," Jimenez said, "but " you kind of expected that some change is going to happen."

Additional material by staff writers Molly Bloom and Regina Dennis. lheinauer@statesman.com; 445-3694

*Sam Houston ordered to close; High school failed standards, but a reopening's already planned
The Houston Chronicle June 6, 2008 Friday*

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HEADLINE: Sam Houston ordered to close;
High **school** failed standards, but a reopening's already planned

BYLINE: ERICKA MELLON, JENNIFER RADCLIFFE, Staff

BODY:

The Texas education **commissioner** ordered Sam Houston High **School** to close Thursday but

in the same breath gave the Houston **school** district another shot at overhauling the campus, which has not met minimum academic standards for six straight years.

Houston Independent **School** District Superintendent Abelardo Saavedra said he plans to ask **Commissioner** Robert Scott to reopen the northside campus in August with a new principal, mostly new teachers, a different academic focus and perhaps a separate **school** for freshmen.

"This is not the end of the story," Saavedra said Thursday. "This is actually the beginning of a great new story."

With the worst academic streak in Texas, Sam Houston has tested state lawmakers' promise to shut down or take over consistently poor-performing **schools**. Some question whether the law is tough enough if those **schools** are allowed to reopen, albeit significantly redesigned.

But others, including Saavedra, criticize a state accountability system that would force closure of a **school**, such as Sam Houston, that has made significant progress and missed the "academically acceptable" mark this year only because of a few students' math scores.

The math portion of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills has tripped up the **school** for five years, with the passing rates of black students remaining below 30 percent. (**Schools** are judged on the scores of individual groups of students: blacks, Hispanics, Anglos and economically disadvantaged.)

Roughly 2,500 predominantly poor, Hispanic students attend Sam Houston. Fifty-nine black students attempted the TAKS test.

What comes next

For his part, Scott said he is simply following the law, though he praised the gains made by Sam Houston.

"I'm willing to work with the district to take a look at their plan," he said. "The real point is, let's put together a program that better serves those kids."

Saavedra's preliminary plan is to turn Sam Houston into two **schools** - one for ninth-graders and the other serving the rest with a focus on math, science and technology. Parent meetings are planned for early next week, and the **school** board is slated to vote Thursday on a proposal to send to Scott.

Under state guidelines, the reinvented **school** must have a different name and instructional program. At least 75 percent of the teaching staff and half of the students must be new. About 170 teachers work at Sam Houston.

Some education watchdogs question whether those measures provide true reform.

"What the law requires is the equivalent of rearranging deck chairs on the Titanic," said Bob Schaeffer, public education director for the Massachusetts-based National Center for Fair and Open Testing. "The truth is that research has found there's no consistent intervention that works."

Johnston High School in the **Austin school** district also must close under Scott's order. Scott has not ruled yet on Oak Village Middle **School** in North Forest.

According to the Texas Education Agency, the reinvented **schools** would get a clean slate. If the new Sam Houston fails to meet academic standards in 2009, for instance, it would be only a first-year offender, so state sanctions would start over.

State Rep. Rob Eissler, who chairs the House Public Education Committee, said he supports the ruling on Sam Houston, though he and other lawmakers are working on a proposal to revamp the state's accountability system.

"Shutting a **school** down is a bigger deal than just shutting the doors and finding something else to do with the building," said Eissler, R-The Woodlands. "It's the center for a neighborhood. That's why we need an accountability system that can be preventative and not just punitive."

Previous changes

Sam Houston has had several makeovers, with a large part of the teaching staff replaced in 2005. The next year, Saavedra put the **school** under the control of his chief academic officer, Karen Garza, and encouraged smaller classes and instructional coaches for teachers.

In 2007, the board approved a \$300,000 plan that included a partnership with the University of Texas' Charles A. Dana Center, which specializes in teaching math and science.

Now, the 130-year-old **school** will begin anew.

Saavedra has tapped Jane Crump, the principal of Stevenson Middle **School**, which also serves predominantly poor, Hispanic students, to run the reinvented Sam Houston.

Crump took Stevenson from "acceptable" to "recognized" status and said she plans to take Sam Houston to the next level as well.

Marina Mendoza, the president of the parent group at Sam Houston, said she's hopeful the state will sign off on the changes so her two children can graduate from their neighborhood **school**.

"It has been unacceptable for six years. I understand the reasoning," she said. "But with some of the plans I've looked at, it looks pretty promising. I just hope they give us a chance to start all over."

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MORE ON HISD

Saavedra proposes an across-the-board pay hike for teachers. PAGE B1

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TAKS MATH TEST PASSING RATES

Sam Houston High has been rated "academically unacceptable" every year since 2002. **Schools** weren't rated in 2003, the first year of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, and the previous rating was carried over.

The **school's** inability to help black students, who account for about 4 percent of Sam Houston's population, pass the math exam has been its downfall.

TAKS math test passing rates for black Sam Houston High **School** students:

- 2004: 29 percent

- 2005: 25 percent

- 2006: 24 percent

- 2007: 24 percent

- 2008: 29 percent

Source: Texas Education Agency

NOTES: ericka.mellon@chron.com jennifer.radcliffe@chron.com

GRAPHIC: Photo: NEW ORDERS: The Texas education **commissioner** ordered Sam Houston High **School** to close for repeatedly failing to meet minimum academic standards. The **school** received "unacceptable" ratings six years in a row (p. 8)

JULIO CORTEZ : CHRONICLE

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DISD'S STRUGGLING SCHOOLS State could close 3 if ratings don't rise 'Unacceptable' expected for fourth year; action unlikely for 2008-09 THE DALLAS MORNING NEWS June 12, 2008 Thursday

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HEADLINE: DISD'S STRUGGLING **SCHOOLS** State could close 3 if ratings don't rise '**Unacceptable**' expected for fourth year; action unlikely for 2008-09

BYLINE: TAWNELL D. HOBBS, Staff Writer tdhobbs@dallasnews.com

BODY:

State regulators could order Dallas ISD to close three **schools** if they don't improve academic performance in the coming **school** year.

Comstock Middle **School**, Samuell High **School** and Spruce High **School** are expected to receive the state's lowest accountability rating - academically **unacceptable** - for the fourth consecutive year when state ratings are released this summer.

District administrators will brief the **school** board today about what to do in case the **Texas** Education Agency orders their closure.

TEA Commissioner Robert Scott, the agency's top administrator, has the power to close a **school** labeled **unacceptable** four years in a row. But TEA officials said closure for the coming **school** year is unlikely for Comstock, Samuell and Spruce.

Texas public **schools** will not formally receive their 2008 performance ratings until August - the same month the new **school** year begins. To order a campus closed just weeks before **school**

starts would be impractical, particularly with teacher contracts and other issues complicating the situation.

In addition, Dallas ISD ultimately could appeal the **schools'** performance ratings, and those appeals generally aren't resolved until later in the fall.

"While the appeal process is under way, the **school** can continue operating," said the TEA's Suzanne Marchman. State officials would be reluctant to interrupt student learning in the middle of the **school** year even if the district loses its appeal, she said.

Mr. Scott recently notified an Austin high **school** and a Houston high **school** that he is using a 2006 law on **school** accountability to close them.

A plea for changes

Samuell High **School**, Spruce High **School** and Comstock Middle **School** are in Pleasant Grove, a low-income area of southeast Dallas.

Jesse Diaz, a community activist in Pleasant Grove, said DISD should change all three **schools** drastically.

"We need to get rid of everybody and hire brand-new staff," Mr. Diaz said. "By going in and bringing in brand-new staff, with brand-new attitudes, brand-new ideas, I think you will see a change in these students. We definitely can't do it the way it's been done."

Antonio Montañez, a member of the Dallas Achieves Commission and director of a gang intervention and mentoring program, said he and other **school** volunteers have been telling DISD officials for years that the Pleasant Grove **schools** are troubled.

"The environment is so bad that the kids do not learn," he said. "If you go into the lunchrooms, if you go into the back, every time I go there's a fight. Kids do whatever they want to do."

Other possible moves

But it's possible that none of the **schools** will close.

Mr. Scott has other sanctions at his disposal. He could appoint a TEA monitor or conservator to intervene in **school** affairs.

Other possible sanctions include appointing a nonprofit entity to manage a failing **school**; placing it under control of another **school** district; or granting DISD a one-year waiver and requiring the district to contract with an outside company - if the **school's** problem is limited to a specific academic area that can be remedied with technical assistance.

The commissioner also may choose to do nothing. But any **school** that remains open and is academically **unacceptable** for a fifth year must be closed or have one of the alternative methods put in place.

Commissioner's call

Before the **Legislature** passed the new accountability law, a commissioner had wide discretion in what to do with habitually low performing **schools**, said Ms. Marchman, the TEA spokeswoman.

The old rules constantly used the word "may," broadly leaving the decision to the commissioner.

"I do know that it's moved from 'may' to 'shall,'" Ms. Marchman said.

Mr. Scott will probably decide what steps to take after **school** ratings are released Aug. 1, TEA officials said.

Staff writer Terrence Stutz in Austin and Vanesa Salinas of Al Día contributed to this report.

CHECKLIST Possible sanctions

The **Texas** Education Agency commissioner can impose sanctions on any **school** rated academically **unacceptable** - the state's lowest ranking - for four consecutive years. **Schools** ranked **unacceptable** five consecutive years must face one of these sanctions:

***School** closure.

*Appointment of a monitor, conservator, management team or board of managers to the district to ensure and oversee implementation of the **school's** improvement plan.

*Place the **school** under "alternative management" of a nonprofit or another **school** district.

*Provide a one-year waiver of alternative management when the **school's** problem is limited to a specific academic area. Require the district to contract with an outside party to provide technical assistance to remedy the problem.

SOURCE: **Texas** Education Agency

AT A GLANCE The campuses at risk

SPRUCE HIGH **SCHOOL**

Location: Pleasant Grove

Students in 2007: 1,534

Teachers in 2007: 100

State rating: Academically **unacceptable**

Trouble: Percentage of students passing 2008 math TAKS decreased. Black students show biggest drop, according to preliminary results. TAKS passing rates decreased in math for all ethnicities.

SAMUELL HIGH **SCHOOL**

Location: Pleasant Grove

Students in 2007: 1,905

Teachers in 2007: 127

State rating: Academically **unacceptable**

Trouble: Students performed more poorly on the 2008 math TAKS than in other subjects, according to preliminary results. Percentage of 10th-graders failing math exam increased more than other grade levels.

COMSTOCK MIDDLE **SCHOOL**

Location: Pleasant Grove

Students in 2007: 943

Teachers in 2007: 67

State rating: Academically **unacceptable**

Trouble: Seventh-graders continued to struggle in math. Black students in the seventh grade had the **school's** biggest drops in math and reading.

SOURCES: **Texas** Education Agency; Dallas ISD

GRAPHIC: PHOTO(S): (FILE 2008/Staff photo) Michael Hinojosa, DISD's superintendent, paid a surprise visit to Comstock Middle **School** in April. Comstock and two other campuses in

Pleasant Grove may face an uncertain future after 2008 performance ratings are released in August. CHART(S): 1. AT A GLANCE The campuses at risk 2. CHECKLIST Possible sanctions

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Texas schools await accountability ratings today; Polytechnic High could face closure Fort Worth Star-Telegram (Texas) August 1, 2008 Friday

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BYLINE: EVA-MARIE AYALA and DIANE SMITH, eayala@star-telegram.com

BODY:

Polytechnic High School students are making gains on the state's standardized test, but those scores may not be enough to keep the southeast Fort Worth school off the list of those targeted for closure because of poor academic ratings, officials said.

The annual accountability ratings for Texas schools and school districts are scheduled to be released at 1 p.m. today. If Poly is rated academically unacceptable for the fourth year in a row, it will face tougher sanctions that could include closure.

Schools that fail to improve after four years may be closed or placed under alternative

management by Texas Education Commissioner Robert Scott, said DeEtta Culbertson, a Texas Education Agency spokeswoman.

Last year, all traditional schools in Northeast Tarrant County and the Arlington area were rated academically acceptable or better.

As of Thursday, Scott had not said how he will handle schools rated academically unacceptable for a fourth or fifth year, Culbertson said.

Before deciding to close a school, the commissioner reviews monthly campus reports and improvement plans.

Schools facing a fifth year as academically unacceptable are also asked to have provisional plans in place. By the fifth year, Texas law dictates that the commissioner "shall order closure," Culbertson said.

Polytechnic Principal Gary Braudaway said Thursday that he has seen the rating information, though the district had not released it publicly.

"The bottom line isn't the bottom line on these ratings," he said. "What the ratings don't show is that scale scores are up, some students by 200 to 600 points. ... They don't show the students' growth we've had here."

The state has closed two schools for poor performance: Johnston High School in Austin and Sam Houston High School in Houston, both in June. Johnston was facing its fifth year as academically unacceptable, and Houston was facing its sixth.

A third school, G.L. Wiley Middle School in Waco, is facing its fifth rating as academically unacceptable. Scott ordered help in science instruction and granted the school a one-year waiver from alternative management, according to the Waco school district Web site.

This year, more students must pass the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills for their schools to be rated academically acceptable, the second tier on the state's four-tier rating scale.

Many challenges

The Fort Worth district had the most schools in Tarrant County - 15 - rated unacceptable last year.

Four high schools besides Polytechnic were also rated unacceptable: Diamond Hill, Dunbar, Eastern Hills and South Hills.

Four middle schools - Dunbar, Leonard, Meadowbrook and Wedgwood - missed being rated

acceptable last year, and five elementary schools did not reach that rating. Those were I.M. Terrell, Morningside, Sunrise-McMillian, Western Hills (both primary and elementary) and Woodway.

District leaders have said the number of schools rated unacceptable will go down this year. They are also predicting an increase in recognized schools.

Charter schools

Three area charter schools will learn whether they have been rated unacceptable for the third year. They are Jean Massieu Academy in Arlington, and Richard Milburn and Theresa B. Lee in Fort Worth. If they fail to reach acceptable status, they will have to replace staff.

Jean Massieu, which caters to deaf students, and Richard Milburn have a state monitor assigned to them because of low ratings. A state conservator was appointed to Theresa B. Lee in September because of testing irregularities on the 2005 TAKS.

Lee and Milburn market their campuses to students at risk of dropping out, particularly those who have fallen behind or struggled in traditional classes.

Tougher standards

Middle schools have an extra hurdle to pass this year to be rated acceptable.

For the first time, eighth-grade science test scores will be used toward accountability ratings. Science has traditionally been one of the areas on the TAKS in which many schools have struggled.

Additionally, the minimum passing rates to reach the acceptable rating have increased by 5 percentage points in science, math, social studies, writing and reading.

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HEADLINE: Despite gains, Pearce to close

BYLINE: Joshunda Sanders and Kate Alexander AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

BODY:

Pearce Middle School will close this fall under orders from the state, Austin school district Superintendent Meria Carstarphen announced Wednesday .

For years, students at the Northeast Austin school have struggled to meet accountability standards on state achievement tests. The school has been deemed "academically unacceptable" for the past five years and underperforming for eight of the past 10 years, according to the Texas Education Agency .

"This pattern of continuing low performance is not acceptable and currently is unmatched by any other campus in the state," Education Commissioner Robert Scott wrote in a letter to the school district released Wednesday.

Scott's decision does not mean the doors will be locked come the first day of school in August. The district is planning what to do with the campus.

Pearce's performance dramatically improved in recent years, but not enough to clear all hurdles. This year's preliminary test results show students overall met standards in reading, math, social studies and writing. But in science, Pearce missed the mark.

"I am disappointed and respectfully disagree with the TEA decision," said Carstarphen, who is in her second week as superintendent. "I believe that under the new law, Pearce could have stayed open and continued on this accelerated path of improvement."

Changes to the state's school accountability law that were approved this spring allowed Scott to give schools an additional year to meet state standards. State Sen. Kirk Watson , D-Austin, specifically added a provision so schools that were teetering on the edge of mandatory closure this coming year could be kept open.

Four other noncharter schools across the state were on the same precipice as Pearce. Scott might also close one of those schools, Texas Education Agency spokeswoman Suz-

anne Marchman said.

State Rep. Dawnna Dukes , D-Austin, said the Legislature's intent was to give the schools more time to address the multitude of issues that affect student performance. Dukes said Pearce deserved that reprieve given its gains.

"This is totally unexpected," said Allen Weeks , a community activist who lives in the St. Johns neighborhood near the school. Weeks has been active in drives to keep schools in the area open, including Webb Middle School and Reagan High School. Weeks said he expects church members and parents active in improving the school to meet in advance of a district forum Wednesday on the closure.

"I just don't think a school or a community could do any more than the staff has done over the last couple of years," Weeks said. The decision to close the school is unfair, he said. "It's unjust, and it's a disaster for the kids."

Scott said that Austin needs to change the way it does business at all of its struggling schools. Austin has two of the three noncharter schools closed by the state for failing to meet accountability standards. Both campuses are east of Interstate 35. "Kids on the east deserve the same opportunities to learn as the kids on the west," Scott said.

The district will not appeal Scott's decision but has 30 days to submit a plan to "repurpose" the campus - similar to what happened with the former Johnston High School - reopening with a new mission, faculty and students. Scott ordered Johnston closed in June 2008.

Carstarphen and Scott met Wednesday afternoon about forging a plan that will work for the community and the students, said Watson, who convened the meeting.

Scott also had the option of closing Reagan High School, which has fallen short of meeting state dropout and passing rate standards on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

Reagan students made academic improvements based on preliminary 2009 TAKS results, but Scott said Reagan will be rated academically unacceptable for the fourth year in a row when statewide ratings are released July 31.

Scott told Austin school district administrators that Reagan will be spared from closure under its current leadership if it secures a contract for professional services to help improve student achievement and provides additional professional development for teachers.

Carstarphen said she planned to provide the school board options and a recommendation to "stop the perceived cycle of failure and continuous uncertainty for students, families and staff at Pearce."

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