



# District and School Closure in Texas: Implementation, Impact, and Implications

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## What We Studied

Our study of district closure and charter termination includes more than 18,000 students in four districts and more than 48 charter schools. Four main types of schools are included in these analyses:

1. District consolidation in which schools closed entirely and students transferred to schools in a new district (Wilmer-Hutchins ISD and Kendleton ISD)
2. District consolidation in which district accreditation was revoked, but the schools remained open, but within the jurisdiction of a new school district (North Forest and La Marque)
3. Charter schools from which the charter was terminated, the school closed, and students transferred to new schools
4. Charter schools from which the charter was terminated, but the school remained open because TEA allowed for the expansion of an existing charter to take over the campus of the charter being revoked.

The characteristics of the four districts that TEA closed appear in Table 1.

**Table 1. Summary of Consolidated Districts in Texas, 2005–16**

District Name	Last Year in Operation	Enrollment at Time of Consolidation	New District	Enrollment of New District
Wilmer-Hutchins	2004–05	2,916	Dallas ISD	157,743
Kendleton	2009–10	78	Lamar Consolidated ISD	23,769
North Forest	2012–13	6,690	Houston ISD	202,586
La Marque	2015–16	2,284	Texas City ISD	6,359

Source: Texas Education Agency, Academic Excellence Indicator System and Texas Academic Performance Reports.

Briefly, the analyses sought to address the following questions:

1. How did district consolidation and charter school closure influence student enrollment patterns?
2. How did district consolidation and charter school closure impact student achievement?
3. When a campus remained open but changed management, how did new management influence student achievement and other school-level variables?
4. What policy recommendations can be derived from the results of these analyses?

## How We Analyzed the Data

Although the total number of schools closed by Texas authorities constitutes a small percentage of all Texas schools, the number of displaced students is sufficient for a careful study of the impact of these closures. On behalf of Raise Your Hand Texas, American Institutes for Research (AIR) undertook this study, using data available through the PK–20/Workforce Data Repository housed in the Texas Education Research Center (ERC) at the University of Texas at Austin. The PK–20/Workforce Data Repository holds one of the largest and most complete state longitudinal data systems in the United States. Data holdings at the ERC include student demographic, achievement, course-taking, enrollment, and attendance data as well as data on school and district characteristics.

To supplement the quantitative analyses, AIR also conducted interviews with a wide range of stakeholders, including respondents from consolidated districts, officials from districts that absorbed the former districts, charter schools for which TEA terminated the charter, and former TEA staff. Although these interviews enhanced our understanding of the closure process in each district, they did not constitute full case studies of each. Rather, they informed the quantitative analyses described here.

## What We Discovered

When districts consolidate or charters terminate, their former students face academic choices. In each district and charter school included in these analyses, students' pathways were somewhat different: some were bussed to schools far from their homes, some stayed in schools that reopened under new management, and others enrolled in their neighborhood public school, after having attended a local charter school. When evaluating the impact of district and school closure, one of the most fundamental questions relates to student enrollment: Where do the students go?

- Most students from closed districts and revoked charters remained within the public school system, post-closure, although charter school students were slightly less likely to re-enroll in a public school.
- Students from the closed schools studied here were more likely to find themselves in higher-performing schools, post closure, than studies suggest has been the norm in other states. This is true for both students from revoked charters as well as closed districts, although students from closed districts fared better in this regard.
- In the early years of charter closer, students tended to move to a district school, or sometimes another charter. However, by 2015, over one-third of charter students stayed in their same school operated through a different charter. In two cases, the new charter was operated by the same Charter Management Organization (CMO) as was operating the closed charter.

The analyses showed that closing the Wilmer-Hutchins had a positive impact on student outcomes in mathematics but not in reading. At the end of the 2004–05 school year, former Wilmer-Hutchins students were 1.26 standard deviations below the state average in mathematics in terms of proficiency rates, whereas comparison students were 1.09 standard deviations below the state mean. Across time, both groups improved, and by 2008–09, the former Wilmer-Hutchins students had outpaced the comparison students in mathematics, demonstrating a statistically significant rate of improvement. Although former Wilmer-Hutchins students improved in reading as well, their rate of improvement was not significantly different from that of students in the comparison group.

In mathematics, North Forest ISD consolidation had a positive impact on student outcomes in relation to a matched comparison group of students. However, no significant impact of district consolidation on reading achievement occurred (see Figures 11 and 12). The results in these figures are expressed in STAAR scale scores: in mathematics in 2012–13, both former North Forest and comparison students had nearly identical STAAR scores: 1398.78 and 1399.88. However, over the three years included in these analyses, the former North Forest students improved at a faster rate, and by the spring 2016 testing, their scale score was 1550.6, or nearly 24 points ahead of the comparison students. The difference in gains between the former North Forest students and comparison students is statistically significant and substantively meaningful. By way of comparison, in 2017 expected progress between fourth and fifth grade STAAR

reading scores was 32 points; thus, the difference between former North Forest students and the comparison students was approximately three-quarters of a year of average growth.<sup>1</sup> Because the expected progress target value varies by grade and subject, one should be cautious when interpreting the substance of these findings in mathematics. Also recall that these analyses only included elementary students, whereas high school students may have experienced the district closure very differently. Moreover, the significant and positive results are not evident in reading.

Unlike in Wilmer-Hutchins and North Forest, charter closure had no significant impact on student outcomes in reading or mathematics, for the 2014 or 2015 closures. For students displaced by charter closure in 2015, achievement levels remain very close to those of the comparison students; slight differences are not significant. Thus, although these students appear to have not directly benefitted from the closure of these schools, their academic achievement did not suffer.

## **Policy Recommendations**

For decades, Texas (and other states) have tried to remedy the challenges associated with struggling schools by shining a spotlight on low performance, mandating interventions, and providing external supports and resources. And, occasionally, TEA resorted to the strictest of policy mechanisms: shutting down districts and schools with entrenched challenges, both academic and financial. But did these actions benefit or hinder students?

From these analyses, we have learned that **district consolidation** does not appear to hurt academic performance **and can sometimes boost student outcomes**. However, successful outcomes are far from a sure thing. Thus, closure should remain a policy option, but used sparingly, only in cases in which achievement levels are unambiguously low and when viable, higher-performing transfer schools are available. To improve the likelihood that this policy option benefits the students it is intended to help, we offer a short set of recommendations for Texas decision makers at the state and local levels.

**A precursor to closure should be assurance and supports that enable displaced students to transfer to higher performing schools.** Moving students to lower performing schools is disruptive and futile. Fortunately, many Texas students displaced by closure transferred to higher performing schools. But to best position students for future success, education decision makers should ensure students affected by school closure have the opportunity to transfer to a higher performing school. These analyses demonstrate that Texas students displaced by charter school closure were more likely to transfer to lower-performing schools. In the absence of a school district with delegated responsibility to communicate effectively with parents about school options, state officials should provide more information and supports as students transition to new schools.

In some cases, terminated charter schools in Texas were allowed to remain open under new charter management, and our analyses suggest this may be a viable option in some cases. However, state leaders should be certain that the new operator is better positioned than the old to manage the school. This may be a stronger policy option for charters being revoked for financial than academic reasons.

**Establish conditions for success at the local level.** It may be easier to derail the success of district or school closure than to ensure positive outcomes, but decision makers should proactively seek to avoid pitfalls. Toward this end, we suggest the following:

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<sup>1</sup> From *STAAR Progress Measure Questions and Answers*: “The student who scored at least a 1550 in grade 4 reading (based on the *Meets* standard) would need to earn a score of 1582 on the grade 5 reading test (based on the *Meets* standard) or higher to maintain the *Meets* performance level in grade 5 reading. From grade 4 to grade 5, if the student’s score increased by 32 points ( $1582 - 1550 = 32$ ), then the student would have maintained *Meets* performance. Therefore, a student who was in *Meets* performance level in grade 4 reading would need to increase his/her score by 32 points or more in grade 5 to have the *Expected* growth. Because the *Meets* performance standards are not the same across grades and content areas (i.e., they do not have the same numerical value), the *Expected* progress target value will differ from grade to grade and across content areas.” Retrieved from <https://tea.texas.gov/student.assessment/taarprogressmeasureQandA.pdf>.

- *Ensure that receiving districts and CMOs are prepared for the task.* Recognizing the challenges associated with taking over a struggling district or school, it should be assumed only by districts and CMOs with stable staff, an available pool of high-quality teachers and administrators, effective resource management, and strong academic results.
- *Ensure the process is perceived as fair and well justified.* District or school closure often raise a range of strong emotions, including disappointment, hope, or skepticism. Although closure determinations were driven by data, community members may interpret these decisions to be inconsistent with their own perceptions of progress. Persistent communication and transparency on the part of education policymakers could help alleviate this. As one interviewee suggested, TEA “should have some actual data to substantiate the reasoning that you use to make decisions.”

**Consider various approaches to what happens after closure.** Thus far, Texas has tried two options: complete closure and reopening under new management. The Wilmer-Hutchins ISD closure and the subsequent increases in student achievement suggest that closing school doors and moving students elsewhere is a viable option. Although some local administrators were concerned about spreading the Wilmer-Hutchins students among many Dallas schools, student achievement improved nonetheless. Administrators should be attuned to student transitions, but it does not appear necessary to move students as entire cohorts to ensure successful social and academic transitions.

Still, Texas policymakers may want to explore hybrid approaches to opening schools under new management. When North Forest and some charter schools reopened under new management, most retained the same name, students, and catchment area. To succeed, these schools may need to be reinvented entirely. For example, a school could become a STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) magnet school or develop a dual-language immersion program, thus changing the substantive focus and perhaps attracting new students.

**Finally, Texas should continue to measure outcomes of students affected by closure and consolidation.** Despite the increased number of closures in the past few years, the affected students represent only a small percentage of the Texas school population. If the Texas data system included an indicator for each student of a closed campus, these students—and the schools to which they transfer—could be flagged, monitored, and compared with others across time.

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