

## 5 Collin County districts drop to acceptable rating

Science scores the culprit for many as leaders look to regroup

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By STACI HUPP / The Dallas Morning News  
shupp@dallasnews.com

Five of the largest school districts in Collin County slipped from recognized to academically acceptable this year in the Texas Education Agency's ratings.

Some school administrators planned to prep principals for questions from curious parents in a county whose first-rate schools have been a magnet for families for decades.

"'What happened' – that's going to be the natural question," said James Ashby, assessment and accountability director for the Plano school district. "That's a concern as far as the perception of the rating itself."

Ratings in Allen, Frisco, McKinney, Plano and Wylie, along with five other North Texas districts, sank a notch to acceptable, the equivalent of a C grade.

Higher standards this year made it more difficult for school districts to hold their own in the ratings. Many school officials blamed the science test scores of poor and minority children.

Overall, Plano ISD's student passing rates on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills were 90 percent or better in all subjects, which would have been exemplary. But weaknesses in science scores, particularly among subgroups of poor and Hispanic students, drove the district's ranking down to the "acceptable" level.

In Frisco ISD, the 73 percent average passing rate in science this year for black test-takers would have been high enough for a recognized rating last year. But because the benchmark for recognized status jumped from 70 percent to 75 percent, that category fell to academically acceptable. As a result, the district's rating slipped to academically acceptable this year after two straight years of recognized status.

Frisco school officials say they've hired an administrator this year specifically to dig through individual student test data and diagnose weaknesses. Administrators said science and math are areas of focus.

Debra Nelson, assistant superintendent in Frisco, said large numbers of students moving in and out of the district affected the rankings.

"In a district that is growing as rapidly as Frisco ISD, we know that mobility is a factor, but that is not an excuse," she said. "We need to take students from where they are when they come to us and work diligently to move them to where they need to be."

Some school officials acknowledge that could be tough as their districts take on more harder-to-teach students. Less than 10 percent of Wylie's test-takers were from low-income families when John Fuller became superintendent in 1993. Now a quarter of them are, Dr. Fuller said.

"As the bar is being raised, we're still right there at the breaking point to be recognized," Dr. Fuller said. "Am I disappointed? Yes. But my goal is to be exemplary here in Wylie, and we're a few percentage points away from being recognized."

The disappointment was not limited to the outlying suburban areas.

The science scores of Hispanic students dragged down the Carrollton-Farmers Branch school district, whose rating dropped from recognized to academically acceptable.

Farmers Branch City Council member Tim O'Hare pointed to declining schools last year when he proposed ordinances cracking down on illegal immigrants who rent apartments in the city.

District officials, however, say students have improved in many other areas, which makes the state rating hard to swallow.

"I'm devastated about it because I believe those kids can do it," Superintendent Annette Griffin said. "We've just got to make sure we're teaching them so they can."

[There were bright spots this year: More North Texas school districts received the highest mark from the state.](#)

[Highland Park was the lone exemplary school district last year. This year, Carroll, Sunnyvale and Lovejoy school districts joined Highland Park on the list.](#)

[Celina, a rural district in Collin County, also improved its rating from academically acceptable to recognized. District leaders linked that feat to a strong push in math and science at the high school.](#)

[Lovejoy school officials say their payoff came from unusually high standards in that district. The district last year added grades six through nine, which meant first-ever TAKS testing at middle and high school levels.](#)

[Every student in the small district's new high school took pre-Advanced Placement classes last year. Superintendent Ted Moore believes that move protected the district's rating.](#)

["High school is where it tends to start to get really challenging, so we were very proud of the performance of our ninth-grade kids this year," Mr. Moore said.](#)

Administrators in other school districts were just happy to cling to their rating, which was the case in Richardson.

Three schools in the inner-ring suburban district fell from recognized to academically acceptable, but four other campuses jumped a notch. The number of exemplary campuses grew from eight to 12.

"We're very pleased to be recognized for the second consecutive year, particularly when you consider that the standards increased from last year to this year," Richardson ISD Superintendent David Simmons said. "I think that makes it even more of an accomplishment."

Staff writers Katherine Leal Unmuth and Scott Goldstein contributed to this report.