

The Hallways of Greatest Need

*When the Students Who Need the Most
Are Served by the Texas Schools That Need More, Too*

iLEAD

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INTRODUCTION

Texas's Hallways of Greatest Need

In my previous article, *America's Literacy Story*, I examined the literacy challenges facing children across the United States, with particular attention to the South. Texas is part of that larger story, but after nearly three decades working in its public schools, I know that statewide numbers tell only part of what children and educators experience. To understand what literacy challenges look like in practice, we have to look beyond reading scores and consider the schools children attend, the needs they bring with them, and the instructional systems responsible for helping them succeed.

In 2025, 130 Texas school districts and charter systems received a D accountability rating and 34 received an F. At the campus level, 924 schools received a D and 395 received an F, for a total of 1,319 Texas campuses with a D or F. [1]

In examining Texas schools, I am using the finalized 2025 accountability ratings, even though preliminary 2026 results have been released. These figures allow me to look more closely at the campuses that continue to struggle academically and the children attending them.

A D or F identifies a campus that is struggling academically, but it tells us little about the children attending that school or the instruction and support they receive. Those are the things I want to examine more closely.

When I look at accountability ratings, I understand their purpose and why parents and communities need a clear picture of how their schools are performing, but the letter itself has never drawn me to this work. I care about what happens behind that letter and what it tells us about the children being served, especially when students with significant academic and economic needs walk into schools that struggle to meet those needs themselves. For me, improving a rating only matters when the change reflects stronger instruction, greater literacy capacity, and better opportunities for the children inside the building.

PERSONAL LENS

Why This Is Personal for Me

Every public school campus where I served as a teacher or administrator was a Title I campus, and every campus I served as an administrator was already struggling academically when I arrived. Later, as a district leader, my work expanded across multiple elementary and middle schools that were also struggling academically. School improvement and turnaround became part of my mission and passion because, after years of doing this work, I understood that changing a school's letter grade meant little if we weren't also changing what students could actually do. I wanted to see children become stronger readers and writers, access grade-level learning, and make gains that could be sustained long after the immediate turnaround work ended.

Much of what I understand about school improvement comes from my years teaching third, fourth, and fifth grade in Pleasant Grove in Dallas ISD. I remember students reading several grade levels below where they needed to be. For example, I taught fifth-grade standards, but some of my students still struggled with reading skills they should have developed years earlier. I had to close those gaps while still teaching what was expected at their grade level.

I took my students' progress personally. I knew the children behind those reading scores, and I knew how hard some of them had worked just to make gains that others might have considered small. I gave up many lunch periods to work with my struggling readers. When their end-of-year results came back, and we saw how much

they had improved, we celebrated like they had won the biggest award in the school. I was proud of them, and I wanted them to be proud of themselves because I knew what it had taken to get there.

Years later, as an academic dean, campus administrator, and district leader, I found myself dealing with many of the same challenges, only on a much larger scale. Instead of looking at my students' reading performance, I examined patterns across grade levels and entire campuses. I had to consider not only what students struggled to learn, but also what teachers taught, how instruction was supported, and what campus and district leadership needed to address. Much of my school improvement and turnaround work grew out of those experiences.

PERSONAL PERSPECTIVE

Putting Language to What I Had Seen

While serving in a large urban district, I worked alongside Dr. Teri Conley, whose advocacy for students and families I deeply admired. Her elementary campus served a high percentage of students in a specialized behavioral unit, as well as the district's highest percentage of Families in Transition, a designation for students experiencing homelessness or housing instability. Many of the children she served had academic needs alongside significant behavioral, economic, housing, and family challenges.

I remember talking with Dr. Conley one day and applauding how she advocated for her students and families. During that conversation, she said something I have carried with me ever since: "Green, this isn't a Black or Brown issue. This is a poverty issue."

Her words stayed with me, in part because of who was saying them. Dr. Conley was a Black woman advocating fiercely for children whose experiences could easily have been viewed only through the lens of race. I didn't hear her words as a dismissal of race, and I don't believe that was her intent. I heard her frame another part of what we were seeing and remind me that, to understand the needs of the children in front of us, we had to include poverty in the conversation.

That conversation became another thread in a tapestry that had been taking shape for me since my years in Pleasant Grove. Across my work as a teacher, campus administrator, and district leader, I saw how academic struggles often existed alongside economic and family circumstances schools did not create but still needed to understand. Her words gave me another way to understand what I had witnessed throughout my career and challenged me to look more closely at the circumstances surrounding the schools and communities I served.

Race is unquestionably part of America's educational story, and any serious examination of student outcomes has to acknowledge the racial disparities that remain in our schools. Poverty is also part of that story, and although race and poverty frequently intersect, they are not interchangeable. To understand what is happening in some of our highest-need schools, we must examine both and ask what the differences mean for the solutions we pursue.

STUDENT NEED

Who Is Walking the Hallways?

A D or F tells us how a campus performed under the state's accountability system, but it does not tell us everything about the children entering that building each morning or the challenges educators must respond to throughout the school day. When I examine struggling campuses, I want to understand the students behind the numbers. How many children come from families experiencing economic hardship? How many are learning English while also developing the reading and writing skills expected at their grade level? How many receive special education services, experience housing instability, or move frequently between schools? Perhaps most importantly, how many enter the school year already struggling to read and understand the material they are

expected to learn? These questions help us understand not only who attends our schools but also what those schools must be prepared to provide.

I have worked in schools serving children from economically disadvantaged communities, and I would never suggest that poverty does not influence academic performance. However, when two campuses serving similar student populations produce very different results, we have to look at what is happening in those schools. I want to know whether children are receiving strong instruction, whether teachers have the support they need, and whether campus leadership is addressing the academic problems reflected in the data. We cannot attribute poor performance to the circumstances children bring to school without also examining the education we provide once they arrive.

That brings me to the question at the center of this piece: What happens when the children with the greatest needs are walking the hallways of the schools with the greatest needs, too?

PERSISTENCE
When Struggle Continues

Looking across more than one year helps us distinguish a difficult accountability year from a pattern that has continued over time. Texas's final 2024 and 2025 ratings give us that opportunity because we can identify campuses and districts that remained within the D/F range across consecutive accountability years. When those patterns persist, we should examine not only what is happening inside individual schools but also how district decisions, instructional leadership, staffing, and resource distribution may be influencing their ability to improve.

We also have to be thoughtful about what those comparisons mean. A campus that moved from an F to a D improved even though it stayed within the D/F range, while another campus may have kept the same letter despite meaningful changes beneath the overall score. Accountability ratings do not capture every gain a student makes or every improvement underway inside a school. Still, persistent D/F performance gives us a reason to look more closely at what is happening and what may be preventing stronger or faster improvement.

Rating Movement	Districts / Systems	Campuses
Stayed at D	80	351
Dropped from D to F	15	123
Improved from F to D	12	208
Stayed at F	17	214
Remained D/F in both years	124	896

Source: Texas Education Agency, Final 2024 and 2025 Accountability Ratings. Figures reflect campuses and districts/systems rated D or F in both years, including those whose ratings changed between D and F. [2]

These figures show that 896 Texas campuses received a D or F rating in both years, although some improved from an F to a D. For the children attending these schools, the concern extends beyond the letter grade. When academic struggles continue across multiple years, families deserve to know what is changing, what support campuses receive from their districts, and whether those efforts are producing meaningful improvements in teaching and learning.

The purpose of examining those campuses is not to create a public roll call of struggling schools. I want the data to help us understand where academic challenges have persisted, whether campuses have received the instructional support, leadership, staffing, and resources necessary to improve, and what Texas can learn from

schools where meaningful progress is occurring. My goal is to shine a flashlight on where our state needs to improve, rather than a spotlight on schools and districts to assign blame.

POVERTY LENS

Poverty Has to Be Part of the Conversation

Poverty does not determine a child's intelligence, potential, or capacity to learn, but it can influence the educational opportunities available to that child. In many communities, where families can afford to live helps determine which public school their children attend. School attendance boundaries, neighborhood housing patterns, and district decisions about staffing and resources can create very different educational experiences for children living only a few miles apart. Across Texas and much of the South, understanding the relationship between poverty and education requires examining not only families' circumstances but also how public education systems are organized to serve their children. For children who enter school with reading difficulties, these differences can influence whether they receive the instruction and intervention necessary to make progress.

Even within the same district, children can have very different educational experiences. Two campuses may follow the same curriculum and meet the same accountability standards. Yet, one may have experienced teachers, consistent leadership, and strong instructional support, while the other struggles in those areas. Having worked in school improvement, I believe we must ask difficult questions about those differences, especially when schools continue to receive low ratings. How are districts assigning teachers, providing instructional support, and directing resources to campuses with the greatest needs? We cannot expect schools to produce the same results without examining whether they have what they need to do the work. That is part of educational equity.

Schools serving economically disadvantaged communities and producing strong academic outcomes also deserve our attention. When one Texas campus shows stronger literacy outcomes than another serving a similar student population, we should examine what may be driving the difference. Understanding how instruction, leadership, and academic support operate in successful schools can help us identify practices worth studying and, where appropriate, adapting in other campuses.

Looking at success alongside struggle keeps poverty from becoming an excuse while still allowing us to be honest about its relationship to educational opportunity.

COMPARABLE CAMPUSES

What Comparable Schools Can Tell Us

Poverty alone does not explain why some schools struggle academically while others succeed. To better understand these differences, we need to compare schools serving similar student populations rather than assuming that two campuses are alike simply because both serve economically disadvantaged communities. The Texas Education Agency provides a useful starting point by identifying 40 comparable campuses for each school based on characteristics such as grade levels served, enrollment, economic disadvantage, student mobility, and the populations receiving language or specialized educational services. These comparisons let us look beyond student demographics and ask what may be different about the educational experiences children receive. [5]

The Texas Education Agency establishes these comparison groups and makes them publicly available, allowing parents, educators, and community members to examine how schools serving similar student populations perform. They do not explain why one school earns a stronger rating than another, but they provide a meaningful starting point for asking those questions. [5]

Eight Campuses From One TEA Comparison Group

The table below begins with Boude Storey Middle and shows seven campuses from its official 2025 TEA comparison group. It is intentionally a sample rather than the entire group of 40 so that the comparison remains readable. The selected campuses received ratings from A to F, showing that schools serving comparable student populations can receive substantially different accountability ratings. [5]

Campus	District	Eco. Dis.	EB	Mobility	2025 Rating
Boude Storey Middle	Dallas ISD	97.6%	49.1%	36.2%	F / 59
Alex W. Spence Talented/Gifted Academy	Dallas ISD	90.7%	47.5%	24.5%	A / 90
Edison Middle	Houston ISD	99.7%	49.2%	18.5%	A / 91
Deady Middle	Houston ISD	98.3%	55.4%	21.3%	B / 86
Clifton Middle	Houston ISD	98.9%	55.4%	30.9%	B / 81
Holland Middle	Houston ISD	97.7%	52.7%	28.6%	B / 81
Welch Middle	Houston ISD	99.8%	54.5%	31.0%	B / 84
Dr. Frederick Douglass Todd Sr. Middle	Dallas ISD	98.4%	42.4%	40.4%	D / 69

Note: This table includes Boude Storey Middle and seven campuses from its official TEA comparison group of 40 schools. Although these campuses share similar characteristics, differences in school programs, staffing, resources, and enrollment practices may influence their accountability outcomes. The comparison does not establish causation. [5]

What stands out to me in this comparison is not simply the difference in school ratings, but what may be contributing to those differences. When campuses serving similar student populations produce different academic outcomes, I want to look more closely at the instruction children receive and the decisions made at the campus and district levels. I want to know how teachers are supported, whether struggling readers receive effective intervention, and whether these schools retain experienced educators. I would also examine how districts allocate resources, particularly to campuses with a history of low performance. The ratings show where differences exist, but understanding what drives them requires looking much more closely at the schools themselves.

How Parents Can See the Same Information

This analysis uses public TEA accountability reports for campus comparisons. Parents can access the Texas Education Agency's 2025 Accountability Rating System page and open the 2025 Campus Comparison Groups resource to search for a campus. The report identifies the target campus and its 40 comparison campuses and displays the student and campus characteristics TEA used in the comparison. [5]

DISTRICT LENS

We Need to Look Where Improvement Is Happening

Examining schools that continue to struggle is necessary, but we also need to understand where improvement is happening. Across Texas, districts serving substantial numbers of economically disadvantaged students have demonstrated that stronger accountability outcomes are possible. Dallas ISD, Houston ISD, Garland ISD, and Ysleta ISD offer different examples worth examining through the Texas Education Agency's published district accountability results. [6] Their experiences remind us that districtwide performance can improve or remain strong even when individual campuses continue to face academic challenges. The more important question is whether those improvements are reaching the classrooms and children who need them most.

Those districtwide results do not mean every campus in these districts is succeeding, nor do they suggest the four districts followed the same path. In fact, the differences are part of what makes them worth studying. Some campuses still struggle, which means an improved district rating should never end the conversation about the children attending those schools.

In my years working at the campus and district levels, I have seen how much attention goes into developing improvement plans, identifying priorities, and reviewing student performance data. However, none of that work guarantees improved instruction. I have always been more concerned with what happens after those decisions are made. Do teachers know what they are expected to teach and how to determine whether students are learning it? Are campus administrators able to recognize when instruction is falling short and provide meaningful support? District leadership must ensure the work doesn't end with a written plan or a better accountability rating. I want to see evidence that our work is improving instruction and helping children learn, especially in schools that have struggled for years.

For parents and communities, an improving district rating should prompt a closer look at what is happening at individual campuses. Are more children becoming proficient readers? Are students who have struggled academically making meaningful progress? Are improvements reaching schools that have historically experienced the greatest challenges? These outcomes deserve our attention. District accountability data can help identify where progress is occurring, but students' experiences and the quality of instruction they receive show whether that progress translates into stronger educational opportunities.

LITERACY LENS

For Me, This Comes Back to Literacy

Literacy sits at the center of this conversation because reading difficulties don't stay confined to the reading classroom. As students advance through school, they encounter increasingly complex texts and specialized vocabulary in science, mathematics, history, and other subjects, while also being expected to learn more independently. When schools don't address reading difficulties, students may struggle to access instruction across multiple subjects, even when they can understand the concepts being taught.

I think about the third grader already several years behind in reading, the seventh grader who has learned to get through class without revealing how much they struggle, and the high school student whose academic difficulties may have followed them for years. I have worked with children at different points along that continuum, and I know that reading difficulties do not simply disappear as students move from one grade to the next. By the time some children reach adolescence, their reading experiences have already shaped how they participate in class, approach assignments, and see themselves as learners.

I am particularly concerned about what happens when we begin responding to a child's disengagement or behavior without looking closely enough at the academic difficulties that may be contributing to it. Not every student who struggles with reading will withdraw from school, develop behavioral difficulties, or leave school before graduating. We cannot draw those conclusions from literacy performance alone. However, I believe we should examine how many children spend years struggling academically before someone identifies precisely what they need and provides the instruction necessary to help them improve.

FROM DATA TO ACTION

What Can We Change?

We cannot change every circumstance a child brings to school, including the economic conditions in which that child lives. We do, however, have considerable responsibility for what happens during the school day. I have spent

much of my career examining instruction, and I still believe the first place we should look is the classroom. Children need teachers who understand the grade-level standards, know how to teach the content, and can recognize when students are not learning. When reading difficulties emerge, we should be able to identify the specific skills a child has not mastered without abandoning the grade-level instruction that child is entitled to receive.

Providing additional reading intervention does not necessarily mean a child's learning needs are being addressed. I have seen students receive intervention for extended periods without making the progress we expected. When that happens, we need to examine the specific reading skills being taught, the assessment evidence, and whether the instructional approach is appropriate for that child. I would rather see a school make a timely adjustment based on what the student is demonstrating than continue an intervention simply because it is already part of the schedule. That requires teachers and campus administrators who know how to interpret student work and assessment results, along with district support to make instructional changes when necessary.

Texas has no shortage of student performance data. We have campus ratings, assessment results, and years of information that can help us identify where academic difficulties persist. What concerns me is whether we are using that information to make meaningful instructional decisions. When a school continues to struggle, district and state leaders should be examining what has been tried, what the results show, and whether the campus has the instructional capacity and resources to improve. Parents should see the results of that work in their children's classrooms, in the support their children receive, and ultimately in the progress they make as readers and learners.

CLOSING PERSPECTIVE

The Children Are the Reason

I certainly want to see fewer Texas schools receiving D and F ratings, but I care far more about what those improvements mean for the children who attend them. Are more children learning to read proficiently? Are they becoming stronger writers and keeping pace with grade-level expectations? Are we addressing academic and language needs without limiting what students are taught or what we believe they can accomplish? These are the outcomes I care about, particularly for children attending schools where academic performance has remained low for years.

A child's neighborhood, family income, or home circumstances should never determine the quality of education that child receives. Texas needs an accountability system that identifies struggling schools, but we also need to examine what happens after we identify them. I want to see improvement reflected in the instruction children receive, the progress they make, and the opportunities available to them long after they leave our classrooms.

Children walking the hallways of our Texas schools do not choose their families' economic circumstances, the attendance boundaries that determine their schools, or the educational systems that serve them. Adults make those decisions and carry those responsibilities. As educators, district leaders, policymakers, and communities, we have an obligation to ensure that where a child lives does not determine the quality of education that child receives. If we are serious about changing the literacy story in Texas and across the South, that commitment must be reflected in what children experience in their classrooms every day.

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