

KELLER CITIZEN JULY 14, 2016 10:02 AM

Area schools get top marks in new financial accountability tool

HIGHLIGHTS

Five Tarrant County districts received 4.5 stars



< 2 of 2 >



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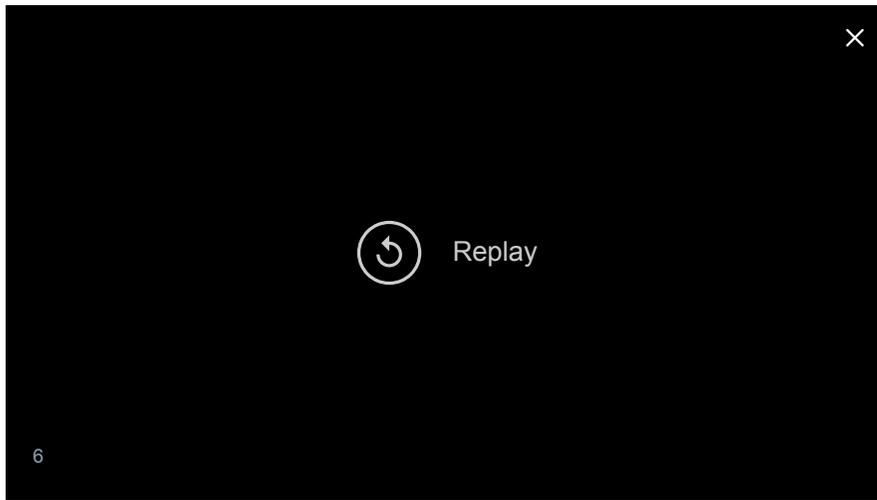
The Keller school district, Westlake Academy, Arlington Classics Academy and Treetops School International received top marks in a new financial accountability tool.

Texas Smart Schools, created by retired Texas Comptroller Susan Combs, Texans for Positive Economic Policy and Texas A&M University's Mosbacher Institute for Trade, Economics and Public Policy, tracks per student spending and academic progress in comparing similar districts and schools.

The program improves upon the similar Financial Accountability System of Texas (FAST) created in 2010 by then-comptroller Combs. It was discontinued after 2014.

"This is a tool to help school districts identify their peers who are able to accomplish great things," said Lori Taylor, director of the Mosbacher Institute and principal investigator on the project.

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The tool “Apples2Apples” groups districts with similar demographics (cost of labor, size, percentage of low-income and limited English proficiency students) and compares what they spend per student and academic progress in math and reading based on standardized test scores from 2011 through 2014. The tool also compares the number of years available for testing.

Taylor said that the tool shows that districts with high proficiency students (LEP) in the elementary years and at the high school level often have more academic challenges. In either case, they require more resources.

It also accounts for a mobility factor. Students who move frequently are more challenging to keep on track in the classroom.

The top score in Apples2Apples is five stars for very low spending and very high academic progress. Around the state, 44 districts and charter operators received the highest score. Another 104 earned four and-a-half stars, still an excellent score, Taylor said.



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Tom Brymer, Westlake town manager and superintendent of Westlake Academy

Mark Youngs, the Keller school district’s chief financial officer, said, “We’re pleased to be on the list. What we have going for us is a good community of involved parents and great teachers.”

Youngs said only 10 of the 44 top rated are districts larger than 20,000 students. Keller has about 33,500.

Keller ranked in the top 15 percent in academic progress and the bottom 20 percent in spending compared to peer districts which included Lake Dallas, Crowley and Kennedale.

Tom Brymer, Westlake town manager and the superintendent of Westlake Academy, said, “We’re always looking for ways to get the biggest bang for our buck.”

As the only municipal-run charter school in Texas, Westlake Academy is able to gain efficiencies by sharing resources with the town. Technical support, human resources and maintenance are some of the shared areas.

Brymer said the school’s leadership team, faculty and parental support foster “a strong academic program that gets students ready for the 21st century workforce.”

Several Tarrant County school districts achieved four and-a-half stars. Carroll, Grapevine-Colleyville, Hurst-Euless-Bedford and Everman had low spending and very high academic progress. Eagle Mountain-Saginaw and the Fort Worth Academy of Fine Arts had very low spending and high academic progress.

For more on the program, go to TxSmartSchools.org.



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