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Leading Change in Texas:

How Members of Chiefs for
Change are Helping to Build a
System of Great Schools





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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Education is a fundamental right. No child in America should be made to wait multiple years for a school to improve, to “turn around,” to provide an excellent education. Too often, however, school improvement efforts move at a pace that fails to deliver real educational opportunity to all students. In Texas, that’s beginning to change.

Recognizing the urgency inherent in improving the state’s low-performing schools, education leaders in Texas opted to dedicate part of the state’s federal school improvement funds to foster deeper, systemic change at the district level, focusing on quality, new schools, expanded options, and improved access—in short,

creating a [System of Great Schools](#) (SGS). What truly sets Texas apart from other states and districts that have adopted similar strategies, however, is a suite of state-level legislative measures that have allowed Texas districts to supercharge the school improvement efforts required under federal law. Taken together, the result is a [different approach to managing a school system](#), one that seeks to systematically create opportunities for all students to enjoy the benefits of a high-quality education. While the actions [do not guarantee quick results](#), there is cause for optimism: [as reported by the Texas Education Agency](#) (TEA), the first cohort of SGS districts generated a 47 percent increase in the number of high-performing campuses and a 34 percent reduction in the number of low-performing campuses since joining the network.



THE TEXAS WAY

When the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) shifted greater control of key decisions, including those related to school improvement, from the federal government to the states, the TEA seized the opportunity. Rather than focus on incremental gains, the state set out to help districts with struggling schools achieve systemic change—by implementing a system that continuously evaluates school quality, seeks community input, and creates school options that are responsive to local needs.

The SGS strategy is designed to increase the number of students in high-performing schools, while reducing the number in low-performing schools. Texas leverages federal funds to help school districts in the SGS

network reinvent themselves, moving from a traditional focus on operating schools—whether successfully or not—to a coordinated, dynamic cycle of continuous improvement that seeks to empower well-developed and coherent schools or networks of schools to deliver great outcomes for students. This approach is not unique, having been adopted in one form or another in cities such as Denver and Indianapolis, based on community input. Unlike in those cities, however, the SGS approach in Texas is supported by the state and funded in part through school improvement dollars that flow from the federal government under ESSA. Moreover, Texas has created a policy environment ripe for the successful implementation of the SGS strategy through the enactment of three state laws that promote transparency in school quality ratings, provide flexibility for local accountability systems and solutions, and incentivize partnerships between districts and charter operators, other nonprofit organizations, and colleges and universities.

[House Bill 1842](#), passed by the [84th Texas Legislature in 2015](#), gives districts maximum flexibility to implement a local turnaround plan, which can incorporate the involvement of high-performing public charter networks and allows school systems to become “districts of innovation,” providing traditional public schools the autonomy and flexibility that has helped lead to the success of a number of public charter schools. The

bill also states that if a district has a single campus that is failing for five consecutive years, the education commissioner is compelled to either order the closure of that campus or install a board of managers to take over the district.

[House Bill 22](#), passed by the [85th Texas Legislature in 2017](#), requires the commissioner to assign districts a rating of A, B, C, D, or F for overall performance as well as school achievement, school progress, and closing gaps in performance. The state previously had a pass-fail accountability system in which districts were assigned a grade of “met standard” or “improvement required.”

[Senate Bill 1882](#), passed by the [85th Texas Legislature in 2017](#), provides incentives for districts to partner with external organizations, such as charter operators, nonprofits, and colleges and universities. First, the bill provides for a possible increase in state funding for partnered campuses. Second, if a district enters into a partnership for a particular school, that school will still be rated by the state for accountability purposes, but there will be a two-year pause, during which the state cannot intervene by ordering closure or taking over the district.

Together, these bills and the TEA’s implementation of the SGS strategy, have set the stage for real and lasting change—and for greater educational opportunity for students who have for too long languished in chronically underperforming schools.



THE SGS MODEL

A key to understanding the SGS model is the word “system”—[defined](#) as “a regularly interacting or interdependent group of items forming a unified whole.” The TEA’s approach seeks to create, at the district level, a system of interdependent steps that work in an ever-evolving cycle and lead to the continuous improvement of school quality. The core components of the approach, which all districts selected for participation commit to implementing, are:

- 1 **Manage school performance** by conducting an annual evaluation of the schools in the district to determine how well they are doing and to identify community wants and needs.
- 2 **Expand great options** by conducting an annual call for quality schools to select high-capacity educators and partner organizations that can incubate new schools, replicate successful schools, or restart struggling schools with a goal of creating autonomous campuses and networks.
- 3 **Improve access to options** by outlining school choices for families and making it easier for students to attend those schools through a unified enrollment system and other supports.
- 4 **Create new organizational structures** by establishing an office of innovation, new authorizing policies, a weighted student funding formula, and a menu of district services to execute the SGS strategy.

In addition, the TEA asks districts to evaluate their systems and determine the best path forward, whether that is by (i) improving traditional schools, (ii) redesigning existing schools where the staff and students remain at the campus but leaders implement a new model, or (iii) taking even more substantial action, such as replacing staff or changing the governance structure, and creating a new school model. The state provides funding for all three approaches but devotes the highest level of funding to support those systems that undertake the most significant measures.

The first two SGS cohorts executed 49 school actions and have planned another 41 school actions to be implemented in the 2020–2021 or 2021–2022 school years.

RECOMMENDATIONS

States interested in adopting the SGS strategy should incorporate the following elements of the Texas model:

- **Foundational framework**—State policymakers should consider ways to create a strong foundation—whether through legislative action or otherwise—that supports flexibility and encourages innovation in school improvement.
- **Operational supports**—State education leaders should prioritize the work and establish a team singularly dedicated to supporting participating districts. The team is responsible for informing districts of their options; managing the grant programs that support the SGS; developing resources; coordinating technical assistance to create and implement SGS plans; maintaining regular touch points with districts to ensure the work is on track; and promoting the model across the state.
- **Funding flexibility**—State education leaders should leverage federal funds to support the SGS network and create grant programs that are sizable enough to incentivize districts to pursue the SGS approach.
- **Community of practice**—State education leaders should create opportunities for participating districts to draw on the expertise of external advisors and provide a forum for leaders to share success stories and solve problems together.

IMPROVING SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT

Education is a fundamental right. No child in America should be made to wait multiple years for a school to improve, to “turn around,” to provide an excellent education. Too often, however, school improvement efforts move at a pace that fails to deliver real educational opportunity.

School improvement—and the role of the federal government in funding and shaping those efforts—has evolved greatly over time, generating no shortage of debate and disagreement. Under No Child Left Behind (NCLB), the 2001 authorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), federal law placed strict requirements on the identification of “schools in need of improvement,” mandating that states and districts choose from among a limited set of federally prescribed school improvement interventions. Although laudable, the goals and requirements of NCLB proved largely unworkable: states bristled under the rigidity of the law’s requirements, leading the U.S. Department of Education to grant a variety of waivers in an effort to retain federal input while allowing more flexibility on a state-by-state basis.

Later, the School Improvement Grant (SIG) program sought to steer states toward a federally determined set of strategies, outlining a number of [prescribed practices within four main models](#)—transformation, turnaround, restart, or closure. While some research has suggested that, overall, the [results of the program were underwhelming](#), the undeniable bright spots—in states like Louisiana, where Chiefs for Change member John White serves as state superintendent of education—demonstrate that real improvement is possible. As White noted, success requires “[a bolder and more disciplined approach than much of what was supported under SIG](#),” one that flexibly responds to the unique conditions of each community while focusing on leadership, autonomy, teacher-leader development, accountability, and the essential role of nonprofit partners.

In 2015, President Obama signed into law the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA), the latest reauthorization of ESEA. Significantly, ESSA returns much of the authority over school improvement to states, requiring state education agencies to reserve 7 percent of their Title I funding to improve low-performing schools. This [shift away from a “top-down” orientation](#) has led to nimble, state-driven approaches that focus on

implementation and effectiveness rather than mere compliance with federal requirements.

States are rising to the challenge, investing in both evidence-based improvement strategies and innovation, as they seek to move at a speed commensurate with the importance of the task. Texas is one example of a state attempting an innovative approach and, in turn, has created a policy environment fertile for progress. The TEA has devoted part of its Title I school improvement funds to the creation of new, high-quality school options designed to serve students who previously languished in chronically low-performing schools.

This report describes the important reforms underway in Texas, including a set of state laws that increase transparency in school quality ratings, provide flexibility for local accountability systems and solutions, and incentivize key partnerships among school districts, charter operators, and other nonprofit organizations. In particular, the report focuses on the [System of Great Schools](#) (SGS) strategy that leverages both federal dollars and state-level supports. It highlights two districts in the state’s first SGS cohort, San Antonio Independent School District and Midland Independent School District, and provides guidance for how other states can support the creation of a similar network of great schools.



THE TEXAS STORY

The phrase “Everything is bigger in Texas” has referred to things as disparate as the [state fair](#) and [pension funds](#). The familiar refrain could also be used to describe the state’s focus on school improvement. In fiscal year 2018, Texas received over \$1.5 billion in Title I funding.¹ Under ESSA, states must set aside 7 percent of these funds for school improvement activities, which for Texas is more than \$100 million per year.²

In Texas, there is an understanding that school improvement strategies must seek to engender change without delay and without regard to entrenched interests. Moving quickly, however, [does not guarantee quick results](#). As Mohammed Choudhury, chief innovation officer for the San Antonio Independent School District and a member of the Chiefs for Change Future Chiefs program, noted recently, “[t]urnaround is hard and it takes some time and it takes relentlessness.” While instantaneous change may not be likely or possible, the need to move with prompt and decisive action is no less diminished. Texas remains focused on providing, on as immediate a timeline as possible, true equity of opportunity.

Recognizing the urgency inherent in improving the state’s low-performing schools, education leaders in

Texas opted to dedicate part of the state’s federal school improvement funds to foster deeper, systemic change at the district level, focusing on quality, new schools, expanded options, and improved access. What truly sets Texas apart from other states and districts that have adopted similar strategies, however, is a suite of state-level legislative measures that have allowed Texas districts to supercharge the school improvement efforts required under federal law. The result is a [different approach to managing a school system](#), one that is designed to create opportunities for all students to enjoy the benefits of an excellent education.

A COMMITMENT TO SYSTEMIC IMPROVEMENT

The ambitious goals for school improvement in Texas go beyond federal requirements or federal funding. Texas has in recent years introduced some of the most cutting-edge and comprehensive reforms aimed at improving all aspects of public education, from [data and transparency](#) to [effective school board governance](#) to school system design. Three measures in particular have created a framework to support and propel the SGS network:

1 See Estimated ESEA Title I LEA Allocations—FY 2018, available online at: <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/titlei/fy18/index.html>.
2 See Sec. 1003(a) of ESEA (as amended by ESSA), 20 U.S.C. § 6303(a).



[House Bill 1842](#), passed by the [84th Texas Legislature in 2015](#), gives districts maximum flexibility to implement a local turnaround plan, which can incorporate the involvement of high-performing public charter networks and allows school systems to become “[districts of innovation](#),” providing traditional public schools the autonomy and flexibility that has helped lead to the success of a number of public charter schools. The bill also states that if a district has a single campus that is failing for five consecutive years, the education commissioner is compelled to either order the closure of that campus or install a board of managers to take over the district.

[House Bill 22](#), passed by the [85th Texas Legislature in 2017](#), requires the commissioner to assign districts a rating of A, B, C, D, or F for overall performance as well as school achievement, school progress, and closing gaps in performance. The state previously had a pass-fail accountability system in which districts were assigned a grade of “met standard” or “improvement required.” The law created three distinct “domains” in which the TEA evaluates the performance of districts and campuses: Student Achievement, School Progress, and Closing the Gaps.

In addition, House Bill 22 established local accountability systems, allowing school districts and public charter schools to create their own plans to evaluate campus-level performance using locally designed indicators in addition to the state’s domains listed previously. Joe Siedlecki, associate commissioner of innovation at the TEA, stated that House Bill 22 “set the stage for transparency on performance for all of the schools and districts in the state.”

[Senate Bill 1882](#), passed by the [85th Texas Legislature in 2017](#), provides [incentives for districts to partner](#) with external organizations, such as charter operators, nonprofits, and colleges and universities. First, the bill provides for a possible increase in state funding for partnered campuses, where each campus may be entitled “to receive for each student in average daily attendance at the campus the greater of either the amount of state funding to which the district would be entitled or the amount of state funding to which an open-enrollment charter school would be entitled.”

Second, Senate Bill 1882 provides an exemption from certain accountability interventions for two years—a “pause,” wherein the TEA will not require the partnered campus to prepare and submit a turnaround plan otherwise mandated under state law.

THE SYSTEM OF GREAT SCHOOLS MODEL

Through its SGS network, the TEA administers federal funds to districts that establish partnerships with charter networks, nonprofit organizations, and colleges and universities in order to close low-performing schools, open new high-performing schools, and expand autonomy for campus leaders. Using state funds, the TEA provides an array of supports to districts within the SGS network, including technical assistance, strategic advising, and professional development. Texas launched its [SGS network](#) in 2017 with an initial cohort of seven districts, and has since added two additional cohorts. Eighteen districts serving more than half a million students are now pursuing the SGS strategy including San Antonio Independent School District and Midland Independent School District, both systems led by members of Chiefs for Change.

Districts that are a part of the SGS network are committed to a common goal: increasing the number of students in high-quality schools each year. “The System of Great Schools Network is designed to build the capacity of school districts to create high-quality, best-fit school options for their students,” TEA Commissioner Mike Morath explained in this [press release](#). “By being a part of

the [n]etwork, school districts receive support to increase the number of students attending highly-rated schools and reduce the number of students attending schools where improvement is required.”

As a bipartisan coalition of some of the nation’s boldest, most innovative state and district education leaders, Chiefs for Change works to advance policies and practices that have demonstrated a measurable impact on boosting student performance or that have significant potential to do so. SGS is one such model. Those pursuing the strategy work to consolidate campuses, launch new schools, and engage expert partners to oversee operations. The model is based on the idea that excellent leaders are the most important factor in creating successful schools and that those with a greater degree of autonomy can provide better support to students.

The SGS requires a dynamic approach to school improvement. The cycle begins with a clear focus on quality: districts must have a mechanism to conduct an annual evaluation of their schools. This is where House Bill 22, allowing for local accountability systems and locally driven plans to evaluate campus-level performance, plays an important role in the SGS network in Texas.

The approach also requires a commitment from districts to expand quality options on a periodic and responsive basis. This typically takes the form of a call for quality schools—a process whereby a district takes performance data along with input from parents and families about their desired school models, and invites interested, high-capacity educators and partner organizations to create new schools, replicate successful schools, or restart struggling schools. Districts consider proposals from people within their own systems who want to implement a new or proven model as a charter, such as the CAST Schools in San Antonio and the REACH Network in Midland, as well as from outside entities like charter networks or colleges and universities. This is where Senate Bill 1882, which incentivizes districts to partner with charter operators and other nonprofit providers, reinforces and accelerates the SGS approach.

SGS districts further commit to supporting families and removing barriers to access that might prevent equity of opportunity. Districts work to publicize and clearly communicate the school choices available to families and make it easier for students to attend those schools through a unified enrollment system, targeted outreach, and other supports.

Finally, SGS districts must themselves commit to transformation. District leaders establish new structures focused on supporting autonomous school leaders, such as a dedicated office of innovation, new authorizing policies, weighted student funding formulas, and a menu of district support services designed to ensure the success of the SGS strategy at the campus level.

“In the past, most, if not all, of the school improvement money coming from the feds down to states was spent on ‘school improvement activities,’” Associate Commissioner Siedlecki explained. “In our ESSA plan, we wrote in that we could use those dollars to create new schools in lieu of improving existing schools. As you can see from our strategy, we’re continuing to do both. What we’re trying to do on one side of the house is to say rather than trying to improve schools as they exist, we can use this money to launch new schools.”

Superintendents leading districts in the SGS network opt in to a learning community and work with an experienced executive advisor and technical assistance partners who help each district plan and execute its individual strategy. The TEA provides professional development, model policies, and tools, including an online platform of technical resources, to accelerate implementation.

SGS COMPONENTS



Source: Texas Education Agency

Districts apply for the two-year SGS cohort program facilitated by the TEA's Division of System Support and Innovation. If selected, districts commit to:

- 1 **Manage school performance** by conducting an annual evaluation of the schools in their district to determine how well they are doing and to identify community wants and needs.
- 2 **Expand great options** by conducting an annual call for quality schools to select high-capacity educators and partner organizations that can incubate new schools, replicate successful schools, or restart struggling schools with a goal of creating autonomous campuses and networks.
- 3 **Improve access to options** by outlining school choices for families and making it easier for students to attend those schools through a unified enrollment system and other supports.
- 4 **Create new organizational structures** by establishing an office of innovation, new authorizing policies, a weighted student funding formula, and a menu of district services to execute the SGS strategy.

LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE: PEDRO MARTINEZ

San Antonio Independent School District was one of the first districts in the state to join the SGS network and was “[perhaps the boldest of the first cohort](#).” Superintendent Pedro Martinez, a member of Chiefs for Change, is pursuing the strategy as part of a larger effort to improve student achievement, stem the tide of declining enrollment, and attract more families to the district. Through the SGS theory of action, the district of approximately 49,000 students has partnered with eight nonprofit organizations to launch a number of in-district charters built around various learning models, including single-gender leadership academies, dual-language immersion campuses, Montessori schools, and career-tech high schools.

To ensure equity, the district created a single, unified enrollment process that allows students to easily apply to multiple open-enrollment schools and that provides information in a variety of languages to inform families about the process and school options. The district also revamped transportation and bus routes, giving students the chance to attend the school that best meets their individual needs. Currently, there are approximately 2,000 students on waiting lists to attend the district’s specialized schools.

Superintendent Martinez believes the SGS has helped San Antonio create some of the nation’s most socio-economically and academically diverse campuses. “San Antonio is the most segregated city in the country when it comes to wealth,” Martinez said. “We’re trying to show a proof point that we can have high-performing schools, schools that have high demand. We reserve seats for families that have a median income of \$20,000, that are single parent households, that don’t own a home, that the adults in the family don’t even have a high school diploma—and we have those children in classrooms with children who are the sons and daughters of college professors.”

In addition to collaborating with various organizations to support the creation of specialized schools, the district recruited partners to operate two of its lowest-performing neighborhood elementary schools as in-district charters: Democracy Prep oversees Stewart Elementary, and Relay Lab Schools, an affiliate of the Relay Graduate School of Education, oversees Ogden Elementary and Storm Elementary.

“Urban districts need to find a third way,” Choudhury [said](#). “We serve the majority of kids in this country. For

the first wave of reformers, chartering was basically a way to get the hell out of the system and avoid bureaucracy so they could [get] the work that matters done. Then people realized that school districts weren’t going to go away. The fight between districts and charters is outdated and silly. We can reach more kids better, smarter and faster if we stop fighting.”

LEADERSHIP PERSPECTIVE: ORLANDO RIDDICK

Midland Independent School District, which serves 26,400 students in the nation’s energy capital of West Texas, joined the SGS network in [an effort](#) to “empower schools and families, increas[e] support and autonomy for school leaders, and develo[p] a shared, local definition for student success” that the district can use to measure progress year over year. [At the start of the 2019-2020 school year](#), Midland empowered three of its campus leaders by supporting them in the process of converting to in-district charters. These campus designs include elementary schools that serve students who predominantly come from economically disadvantaged families (Bunche and Milam) and a campus for gifted and talented students (Carver Center). Bunche Elementary has partnered with Goddard Junior High to create a pre-kindergarten through 8 continuum of services, called the REACH Network, while Milam Elementary is implementing Midland’s first dual-language academy. “We find it just as important to look internally as externally to cultivate strong partnerships and a diverse



set of options to support our students, families, and staff in providing choice options in our community,” stated Superintendent Riddick.

Beyond the schools that have converted to in-district charters, two other partnership models have resulted in new schools. Partnering with a best-in-class nonprofit, Young Women’s Preparatory Network, Midland opened a single-gender STEM opportunity, the Young Women’s Leadership Academy, to help address the underrepresentation of women in the regional economy. The district also partnered with Midland College to launch a pre-kindergarten academy, serving three- and four-year-olds.

In addition, Midland recently announced a partnership with IDEA Public Schools in which that charter network will open more than a dozen schools on seven sites in Midland and neighboring Odessa over the next five years.

The first of those campuses, IDEA Travis Academy and College Prep, is scheduled to open in fall 2020.

“The announcement that IDEA Public Schools will open 14 schools in Midland-Odessa by the 2024-25 school year is the type of education transformation our community needs,” the [editorial board](#) of the *Midland Reporter-Telegram* wrote. “We salute those involved in adding IDEA Public Schools to the list of education options available. Midlanders have long supported school choice, and IDEA brings more high-quality educational seats—lots of them—up to 10,000 in Midland and Odessa by 2030. That is worth celebrating.” In the piece, the editorial board praised the leadership of Chiefs for Change member Orlando Riddick, saying, “We are enthusiastic about the educational opportunities Orlando Riddick has created in such a short period of time as superintendent. He embraces school choice and has been bold in transforming campuses.”

RECOMMENDATIONS

Texas gives greater autonomy to districts that demonstrate thoughtful leadership. As Associate Commissioner Siedlecki says, “School improvement isn’t about saving a building. It’s about providing the right learning opportunities to kids.” The state’s SGS strategy is designed to do just that by incentivizing districts to partner with high-quality charter networks, nonprofits, and colleges and universities to close low-performing schools, expand school options, and empower campus leaders.

States interested in adopting in the SGS strategy should incorporate the following elements of the Texas model:

→ **Foundational framework**—State policymakers should consider ways to create a strong foundation—whether through legislative action or otherwise—that supports flexibility and encourages innovation in school improvement.

→ **Operational supports**—State education leaders should prioritize the work and establish a team singularly dedicated to supporting participating districts. The team is responsible for informing districts of their options; managing the grant programs that support the SGS; developing resources; coordinating technical assistance to create and implement SGS plans; maintaining regular touch points with districts to ensure the work is on track; and promoting the model across the state.

→ **Funding flexibility**—State education leaders should leverage federal funds to support the SGS network and create grant programs that are sizable enough to incentivize districts to pursue the SGS approach.

→ **Community of practice**—State education leaders should create opportunities for participating districts to draw on the expertise of external advisors and provide a forum for leaders to share success stories and solve problems together.