

Texas' dropout problem probably worse than reported

School accountability mandates, such as high-stakes testing, can magnify the problem, researchers say.



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Sunday after Sunday, Sarah Luna's prayer never changed.

With about a month to go until graduation, the 20-year-old Lanier High School senior pleaded with God for one life-changing miracle that seemed hopelessly out of reach: her diploma. Staying in school was harder than she had ever dreamed. Poor study habits and lack of motivation had left her two grades behind her classmates.

She also feared what had become a grim family tradition: Nobody had finished high school — not her mother, her brother or her cousins.

The family curse, she called it.

Luna spent five years in high school trying to avoid becoming a depressing statistic: One in 10 Texas students vanishes from high school each year to an uncertain future, according to the state.

As bad as that number seems, the reality is probably worse. Many experts say the state undercounts dropouts. Three in 10 students who enter ninth grade don't graduate, according to an index developed by Johns Hopkins University researchers that compares the number of 12th-graders with the number of ninth-graders four years earlier.

Texas Education Agency spokeswoman Debbie Graves Ratcliffe said the agency counts dropouts using a variety of methods, including an attrition rate similar to the index. But independent studies and attrition rates don't take into account students who move, she said.

"You're not a dropout, and shouldn't be counted as one, if you started at Austin High School but you graduated from Round Rock High School," she said. But in indexes, "you'd be counted as a missing person. That particularly hits urban districts hard. Like it or not, we have a lot of families in the state

who follow the apartment specials, and those children move two or three times over the course of the school year."

In the fall, Texas will start using the federal definition of a dropout to provide an independent assessment of the state's progress and to make its analysis comparable to other states'.

In the past, districts had until spring of the next school year to re-enroll students before they were counted as dropouts. Under the new criteria, they will have to be re-enrolled in the fall. Similarly, students had until spring of the next year to get a General Educational Development certificate before they were counted as dropouts. The new criteria mean they will have to get one in the fall.

Also, eighth-graders who never enroll in ninth grade will be counted as high school dropouts instead of eighth-grade dropouts.

"It will be held against that school that never even laid eyes on the kid," Ratcliffe said. "I think there will be some concern over whether that's fair."

In Austin, the Johns Hopkins index estimates a high school completion rate of 64 percent, about 27 percentage points lower than its state-reported rate.

The losses add up. Dropouts from the Class of 2006 will cost Texans more than \$31 billion in lost potential wages, tax revenue and productivity in their lifetimes, according to a report from the Alliance for Excellent Education, a Washington nonprofit organization.

"The students who drop out of school will pay a heavy financial price for the rest of their lives," Reg Weaver, president of the National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers' union, said in April. "And our society will pay an awful price for squandering the human potential of millions of young people."

In January, Luna almost quit school. She was still failing courses and skipping classes. Students made fun of her for being older.

As badly as she wanted her diploma, she didn't think she could stand repeating another year of high school.

Barriers to success

Dropping out is a process rather than an event.

No two at-risk students are alike, but poverty, parents who didn't graduate and lack of motivation are common traits.

From first grade at Windermere Elementary in Pflugerville, Luna had problems. She was held back a year because she had trouble reading. In third grade, she moved to the Lake Travis district. Then, while she was in middle school, her mother got a job in Austin. Luna went to live with a friend's family so she could stay in Lake Travis. She enjoyed the arrangement, but she almost failed eighth grade.

Laziness, she said. "I wasn't trying at all."

The lack of self-motivation followed her to Lake Travis High School, where she frequently skipped

classes or arrived late. She had to repeat 10th grade.

At that point, the odds for her success were not good.

"If a kid is held back twice," said Eileen Coppola, a researcher and lecturer at Rice University in Houston, "it's a virtual certainty they will drop out of school."

Policies such as holding students back a grade, high-stakes testing and tougher course requirements designed to increase school accountability can worsen the dropout problem, researchers say.

Even Texas' attendance policy can form a barrier. Students cannot have more than 10 unexcused absences and still receive credit for a course, and that can be difficult for those who work.

For many students, the last hurdle is passing the exit-level Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, which tests students in math, social studies, science and language arts. Students have at least five chances to take the test before graduation. Until last year, the number of dropouts had been going down, according to state figures. Now, as the tests get harder, the numbers are inching back up.

Before the state started using exit exams in 1987, its graduation rate was 86 percent, the state agency said, 2 percentage points higher than the 2005 rate.

After repeating 10th grade, Luna moved back in with her mother and transferred to a school where she could be anonymous.

"Since I was repeating a year, I wouldn't be graduating with all the kids I grew up with," Luna said. "I wanted to come to a different school district where people didn't know me."

It was an awkward fit. Classmates dismissed her as "stuck up," and most of the other older students at Lanier High were immigrants.

Despite the challenge of fitting in, she found the schoolwork easy. Luna clashed with one teacher but got a compliment when she sought a transfer: "I thought you were going to be one of my star students."

But bad habits took hold once more. She started spending more time with friends and less in class. By the end of 11th grade, Luna didn't have enough credits to be a senior. She attended summer school to try to catch up. It wasn't enough.

Dropping out is costly

Policy analysts say the outlook for Texas is bleak without systemic change.

The proportion of Texas residents without high school diplomas is expected to rise 11 percentage points to 30 percent by 2040, according to the Texas State Data Center. The number of high school and college graduates is projected to fall during the same period.

Central Texas employers are hurting for workers at all skill levels, said Susan Dawson, president and executive director of the E3 Alliance, an association of Central Texas educators and researchers that aims to improve the region's economic prospects.

"It's not just high-end engineers," she said. "It's people you would want and expect to have high school-

level literacy and math skills for entry-level jobs."

Drew Scheberle, senior vice president of education and work force for the Greater Austin Chamber of Commerce, said, "Clearly any weakness in the local labor pool does not help us. What concerns us is that students who don't graduate from high school have extremely limited opportunities. You fall off an economic cliff if you drop out."

By spring, it didn't look as if there was any way that Luna could make up the credits in time. Not wanting anything more to do with high school, she decided to skip her senior prom.

Then one day, as she ate lunch in the cafeteria, the boys' basketball coach came up to her. They'd never spoken. Just finish, he told her. Don't drop out.

Luna was puzzled, wondering how he could have known. He said, "Teachers talk."

Earlier this month, a school counselor told her she might make up the missing credits in time for graduation by taking computer courses. Her mother told her to take the chance.

Luna spent nine hours a day in school — even one Saturday — hoping for a miracle. Less than two weeks before graduation, her prayer was answered.

The counselor told Luna that she'd finally get to walk across the stage with her friends to receive her diploma.

"I thanked God all day," she said. "I knew it had to be him."

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When students drop out, everyone pays

Dropouts' earnings: \$13,632 a year, on average.

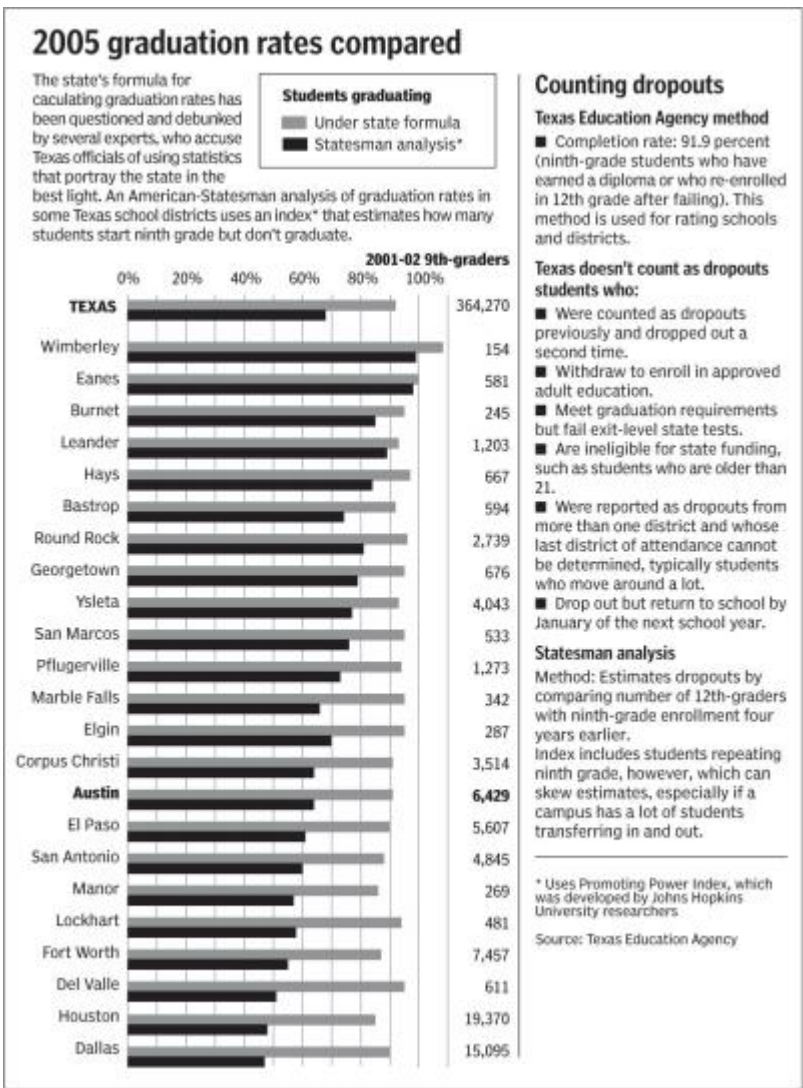
High school graduates' earnings: \$20,688 a year, on average

Difference: 52 percent

Cost to state for dropouts from Class of 2006:

- More than \$31 billion in lost wages, taxes and productivity in their lifetimes.
- More than \$1.6 billion in Medicaid and other uninsured care costs in their lifetimes.
- In the Austin district, it costs about \$6,850 a year for a student's education. Taxpayers spend \$17,700 a year on a Texas prisoner.

Sources: U.S. Census Bureau; Alliance for Excellent Education, a Washington-based nonprofit organization



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