

HOUSTON PUBLIC EDUCATION
INSIGHTS REPORT
FALL 2023

GOOD REASON HOUSTON



Table of Contents

About Good Reason Houston	1
A Word From Our CEO.....	2
Executive Summary.....	3
Declining Enrollment in Public Schools.....	4
Public Schools are Losing Students.....	4
Causes of Declining Enrollment	5
Preparing Students for a Choice-Filled Life	7
Foundation of Strong Academics	9
Foundation of Advanced Soft Skills	10
Living into the Moment.....	11
A Legacy of Embracing Change	11
The Opportunity Ahead.....	12
Conclusion	16
References	18

About Good Reason Houston

Good Reason Houston exists to build awareness of, advocate for, and advise public school districts on measures that will improve the quality of education available to all. We envision a future where every child, in every neighborhood, excels in a world-class public school and thrives in the Houston of tomorrow.



**IMPROVE
PUBLIC SCHOOLS**



**SHARE
DATA**



**BUILD
COALITIONS**



**EMPOWER
PARENTS**



**ADVOCATE
FOR STUDENTS**

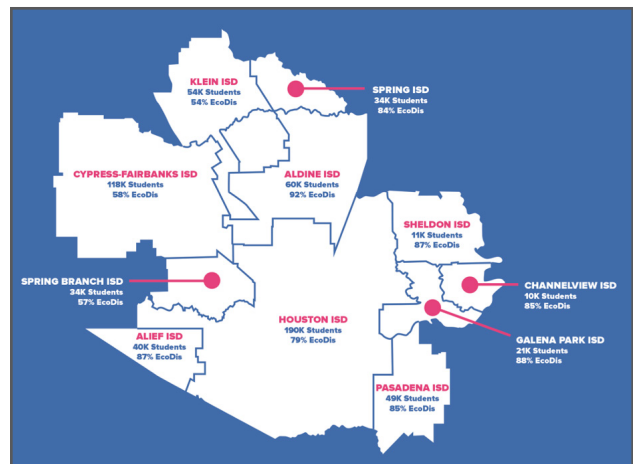
Our Focus Geography

Houston is the fourth largest, and one of the most diverse, urban regions in the country.¹ Given its vast reach, Houston’s public education system has tremendous power and potential to contribute to a vibrant social and economic future for our students and city.

Good Reason Houston defines the “Houston Area” as a region with 11 Independent School Districts serving over 693,000 students across 890 public schools.² These districts are shown in the adjacent map.

This region includes school districts with at least one campus in Houston and 50% or more of their student population identified as economically disadvantaged (EcoDis). Schools and

systems within this geography face unique opportunities and challenges due to their scale and the diversity of their student bodies in terms of income, ethnicity, race, and language.



¹ City of Houston (2023). *About Houston: Facts and Figures*. Retrieved from <https://www.houstontx.gov/about/houston/houstonfacts.html>

² Texas Education Agency (2022). *PEIMS Enrollment Report 2022-2023*. Retrieved from <https://rptsv1.tea.texas.gov/adhocrpt/adste.html>

A Word From Our CEO

During the 2023-24 school year, Good Reason Houston will release four insight reports. Each report will share trends, offer insights, and spark conversation, with the ultimate aim for each of us to walk away more informed and better able to advocate for high quality schools and a strong education ecosystem for our city.

In this inaugural report, we outline how Houston is poised, now more than ever before, to ensure that students receive the knowledge and skills necessary for the future. To get there, we must step into this moment – a moment where rigor and transparency are centered in our accountability standards, the content put in front of students each day is on grade level, and high quality teachers are supported and feel set up for success.

At the time of publishing, many in our community are awaiting the impact of changes to the state’s academic accountability system with trepidation – suspecting that ratings overall will drop. We encourage everyone to pause and think about what these changes to accountability mean and how, with a deliberate and patient response, they may be a step in the right direction. We urge the community to hold steady so we may use the data to act together to improve the state of Houston schools.

We thank you for your support and look forward to working together to ensure that every child in our city receives the excellent and equitable education they deserve.



Cary Wright
CEO
GOOD REASON HOUSTON

Executive Summary

Houston is facing declining enrollment in its urban core public schools. Several factors drive this trend, including a significant drop in birth rates and the relocation of families of color from urban centers. In addition to this, another reason has become clearer – families are beginning to opt out of traditional public education systems.

Families opting out of traditional public schools is a problem. Public schools are a necessary cornerstone of any vibrant society. Understanding why this trend is happening is critical.

Our findings suggest a growing gap between the collective perceptions of families, business leaders, and students regarding what is necessary for postsecondary success and what public schools are delivering. Families strongly believe in the power of education but question whether traditional public schools can provide the necessary skills for success in a rapidly-evolving world. More specifically, there is consensus on the importance of and need for schools to become more adept at cultivating advanced soft skills in tandem with a strong foundation in academic knowledge.

Still, Houston’s public education system has a history of embracing change to meet the needs of students, and we believe it is time for Houston to lean into that strength and adapt again. We are at a moment in time where the political landscape and conditions are prime for embracing a shift in education paradigms – one that continues to center accountability, transparency, and rigor, while leaning into research-driven resources, instructional best-practices, and effective supports for educators.

ADVANCED SOFT SKILLS

Soft skills are personality traits and behaviors that help individuals succeed. Unlike technical skills or “hard” skills, soft skills are interpersonal and behavioral skills.

To get there, we encourage Houston school systems, leaders, and education champions to:

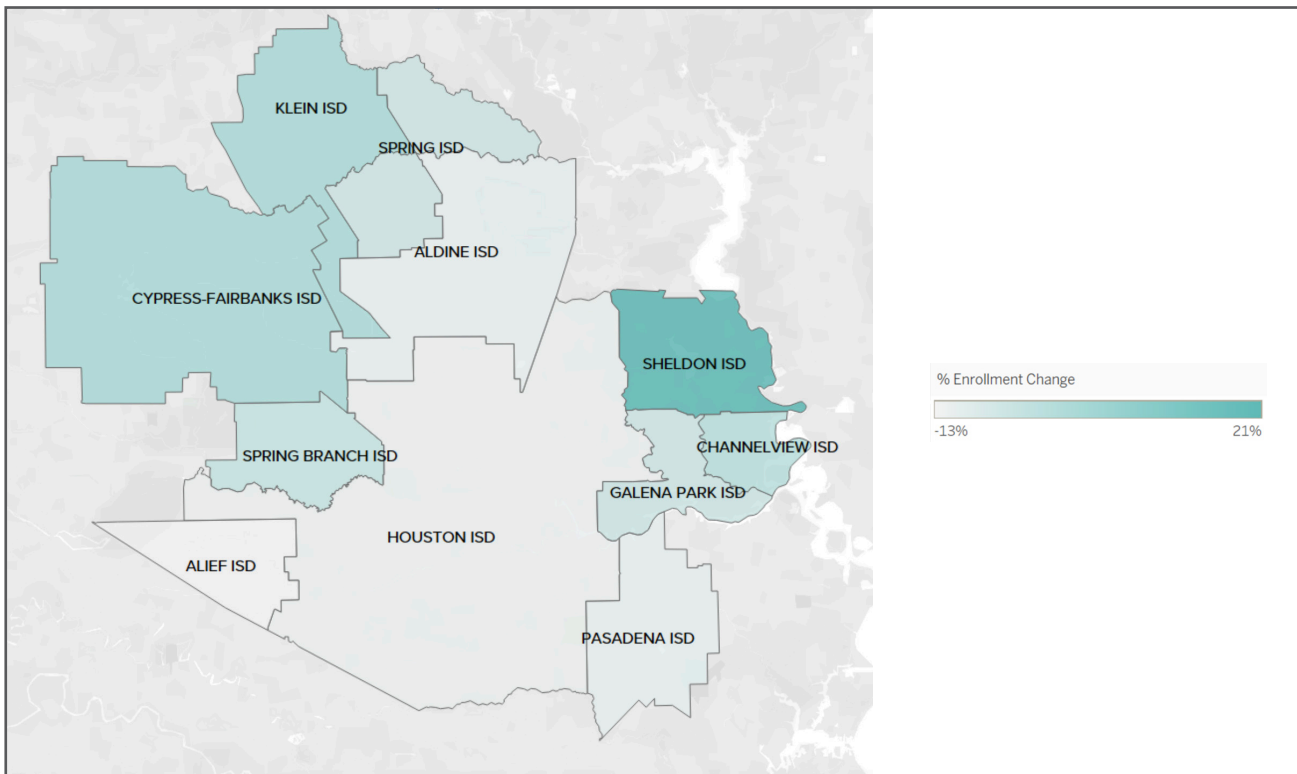
- **Collectively Educate Ourselves:**
A common understanding serves as the bedrock from which strategies emerge and complex problems are solved.
- **Support a Strategic and Thoughtful Implementation Plan:** Change management must be strategic, thoughtful, and faithfully support campus level staff members.
- **Embrace the Discourse, Not Dismiss It:**
Discussions about public education need to honor Houston’s diversity and differing opinions.
- **Be Patient, While Acting with Urgency:**
Act with a sense of urgency, purpose, and determination. At the same time acknowledge that change takes time. Know when to adjust course and why, without ever losing sight of the goal.

Declining Enrollment in Public Schools

Students are missing from public schools in significant numbers.

According to a study by Stanford University and The Associated Press, 1.2 million school-aged children across the United States have are unaccounted for from public schools since 2020.³ Houston shows a generally similar trend of declining enrollment. **In the last five years, enrollment declined by approximately 43,000 students across 11 Independent School Districts;** a 6 percent enrollment decline.^{2,4} As seen in the map below, this is greatest in Alief ISD with a 13 percent decline and Aldine, Houston, and Pasadena ISDs with an 11 percent decline.^{2,4}

Houston Enrollment Change from 2018-2023



Sources: Texas Academic Performance Reports 2018-2022 - All Student Enrollment, Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) - Student Enrollment Report 2022-2023.

² Texas Education Agency (2022). PEIMS Enrollment Report 2022-2023. Retrieved from <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/adhocrpt/adste.html>

³ Spector, C. (2023, February). What happened to students who left public schools during the pandemic? New Stanford-led research tracks their paths. Stanford News. Retrieved from <https://news.stanford.edu/2023/02/08/happened-students-left-public-schools-pandemic-new-stanford-led-research-tracks-paths/>

⁴ Texas Education Agency. (2023). Texas Academic Performance Reports, 2021-2022. Retrieved from <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/2022/index.html>

Why are schools losing students?

- 1. Declining birth rates.** As of 2020, the national birth rate has declined for six consecutive years.⁵ This trend holds true in Houston where birth rates among women 15-50 dropped by 14 percent from 2011 to 2021.⁶ A recent essay in the Houston Chronicle, America is Running Out of Babies, underscores the significance of declining birth rates in Texas. It states, “In Texas, the birth rate is declining even faster than the national average, raising concerns among demographers and economists that the state will see significant labor shortages in the next two decades.”⁷
- 2. Changing neighborhoods and migration patterns.** Since the pandemic, large urban cities, such as Houston, have seen the number of students under five decline by more than 6 percent (1.8 percent in the past year alone), compared to a 0.7 percent decrease nationwide.⁸ According to Census estimates, the number of students under five (the age at which students enter kindergarten) in Alief ISD’s boundaries has dropped by more than 20 percent since 2017; similarly, 20 percent (or 62,000) fewer school-age children lived in Houston Independent School District (HISD) boundaries in 2021 compared to 2017.⁹

Enrollment Changes in Houston from 2018 to 2023

School System	Percent Change in Enrollment 2018-2023
Sheldon ISD	+21%
Cypress-Fairbanks ISD	+2%
Klein ISD	+2%
Channelview ISD	-1%
Spring Branch ISD	-4%
Galena Park ISD	-5%
Spring ISD	-5%
Aldine ISD	-11%
Houston ISD	-11%
Pasadena ISD	-11%
Alief ISD	-13%

⁵ Hamilton BE, Martin JA, Osterman MJK. (2021, May). Births: Provisional data for 2020. Vital Statistics Rapid Release. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr012-508.pdf>

⁶ U.S. Census Bureau. (2011 and 2021). S1302: Fertility, American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2011 and 2021. Retrieved from: <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSSST5Y2011.S1301?q=birth+rates+in+houston+city&t=Fertility>

⁷ Suskind, D. (2022, April 22). Essay: America is running out of babies – Texas could be a life line. Houston Chronicle. Retrieved from <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/opinion/outlook/article/Essay-America-is-running-out-of-babies-Texas-17119650.php>.

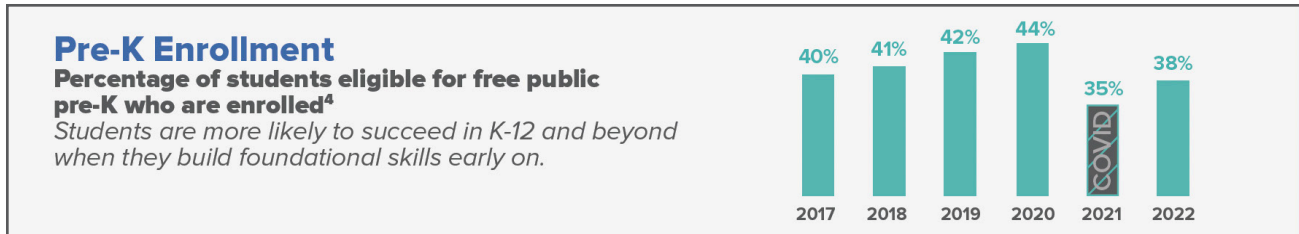
⁸ Dulin, M. (2023, February 15). Public school enrollment is facing a ‘demographic bubble.’ Urban districts are already seeing its effects. Rice University, Kinder Institute for Urban Research. Retrieved from <https://kinder.rice.edu/urbanedge/public-school-enrollment-facing-demographic-bubble-urban-districts-are-already-seeing-its>

⁹ Report compiled by Kitamba with data sourced from: National Center for Health Statistics, final natality data. American Community Survey, Census Bureau

There is a third and concerning factor to examine.

3. Families are opting out. Despite the growing evidence that a strong early childhood education sets the foundation for future learning, only 4 in 10 eligible pre-Kindergarten students in Houston have enrolled in public schools in 2023.¹⁰

Houston Public School Snapshot: Pre-K Enrollment



Even more, families are opting for homeschooling in ways not seen in recent history. Nationally, during the early months of the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, the proportion of Black families reporting homeschooling their children rose from 3.3 to 16.1 percent, the most dramatic increase of all student groups. Hispanic families saw an increase of 5.8 percent.¹¹ And post-pandemic enrollment trends suggest that many students are not returning. The Texas Home Educators network has sustained a fivefold increase in membership the last three years, with the largest growth in Houston and Dallas-Fort Worth.¹² According to a national study, charter schools were the most popular among school switchers pre-pandemic; since the pandemic, homeschooling is now the top choice.¹⁴ As leaders in public education, supporters, and community members, it is incumbent on us to both understand and directly address why families are looking outside of traditional school settings to meet their students' needs.

Due to a lack of space and growing number of requests, our Houston-based Homeschooling Co-Op has had to put a limit on the families they can partner with, "...we have seen an increase in interest in new homeschool families specifically, minority families."

– PARENT MEMBER OF HOME GROWN HOMESCHOOLERS INC.¹³

¹⁰ Texas Education Agency. (2023). Texas Public Education Information Resource (TPEIR): Texas Public Prekindergarten Programs and Enrollment Ages 3 and 4 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.texaseducationinfo.org/Home/Topic/Prekindergarten%20Programs?br=PK-12>

¹¹ Eggleston, C. and Fields, J. (2021). Census Bureau's Household Pulse Survey Shows Significant Increase in Homeschooling Rates in Fall 2020. United States Census Bureau. Retrieved from: <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/homeschooling-on-the-rise-during-covid-19-pandemic.html>

¹² Good Reason Houston interview with Texas Home Educators Network. (September 2023)

¹³ Good Reason Houston interview with Home Grown Homeschoolers Inc. (September 2023)

¹⁴ National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2022). Never Going Back: An Analysis of Parent Sentiment in Education. Retrieved from: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED625440>

Preparing Students for a Choice-Filled Life

Trust in Houston public schools is declining, but not a belief in education.

In March of 2023, Good Reason Houston partnered with Wakefield Research, an independent third-party research firm, to survey 1,500 Houston families.¹⁵ The survey was designed to understand the public perception of Houston public schools. Additionally, Good Reason Houston conducted focus groups with families, students, and community members. The headline was clear: parents' belief that schools are equipping their children with what they need to live fulfilled lives is waning.

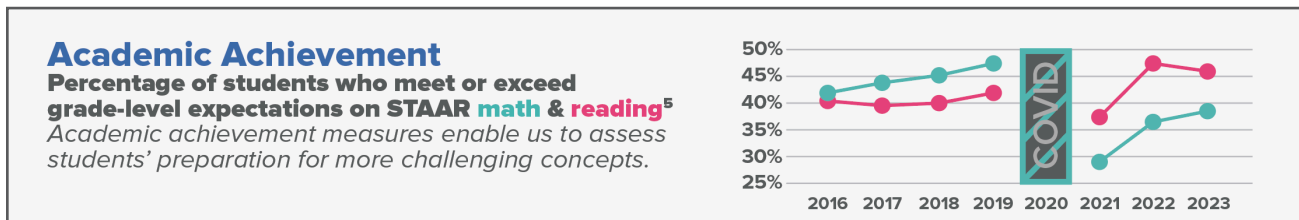
“Families, regardless of income, want what’s best for their kids so when they are making these choices they are making informed choices. We have to look at the choices they are making and use that as an important data point in what we are doing, and what we should be doing.”

– DR. ANTHONY MAYS, ALIEF ISD SUPERINTENDENT¹⁶

Academic performance is unacceptable. Student achievement data¹⁷ shows that too many Houston students are not demonstrating grade-level proficiency in reading or math; they are not performing to well-established benchmarks at the level that the future of Houston demands.

As referenced by the chart below, with less than one in two students on grade level in reading and one in three in math, public education in Houston is falling alarmingly short of acceptable performance. What is even more concerning are the disparities that emerge within various demographic groups. Special Education, Emergent Bilingual, Black, and Latino students are demonstrating significantly lower performance rates than their Asian and White counterparts. It is imperative to persistently address this issue and hold all stakeholders accountable for improvement.

Houston Student Achievement since 2016



¹⁵ Good Reason Houston Parent Opinion Poll. (2019 and 2022). Polls conducted by Wakefield Research. <https://goodreasonhouston.org/2023-parent-poll-insights-1/>

¹⁶ Good Reason Houston interview with Dr. Anthony Mays. (2023).

¹⁷ Texas Education Agency. (2023). STAAR Aggregate Data, 2014-2023. Retrieved from <https://tea.texas.gov/student-assessment/testing/taar/taar-aggregate-data>

WHAT IT MEANS TO “PASS” STAAR

To be considered “passing” the STAAR exam in Texas, a student must fall into the “Approaches” category. Nonetheless, it is important to note that “approaching grade level” is not synonymous with being on grade level. The official guidance from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) states that “approaching grade level” suggests that students are “likely to require targeted academic intervention to succeed in the next grade or course.” At a “Meets” category, TEA states “performance in this category indicates that students have a high likelihood of success in the next grade or course but may still need some short-term, targeted academic intervention.”^{17b}

This nuanced conversation is often overshadowed in discussions among school officials, legislators, and families. It is possible for a student to pass the STAAR test, yet not be on grade level. Also of note, the percent of questions a student must get correct on the test remains achievable. On average, students must get somewhere between three and four answers correct of 10 questions. The tables below reflect first, the percent of questions a student must get correct and second, the percent of students at approaching or meeting grade level in the corresponding grades.

Percent of Questions a Student Would Have to Get Correct on the STAAR Exam to Receive an Approaches or Meets

Grade	Subject	% Approaches	% Meets
3rd Grade	Math	30%	38%
3rd Grade	Reading	27%	43%
5th Grade	Math	30%	43%
5th Grade	Reading	27%	49%
8th Grade	Math	33%	34%
8th Grade	Reading	27%	51%

Source: [STAAR Performance Level Descriptors](#)

Percent of Students in Houston Receiving an Approaches and Meets Level

2023 Houston Region STAAR 3-8 Reading-Language Arts & Mathematics			
Grade	Subject	% Approaches*	% Meets
3rd Grade	Math	35%	54%
3rd Grade	Reading	38%	57%
8th Grade	Math	34%	54%
8th Grade	Reading	35%	54%

Source: [STAAR Aggregate 2023](#)

Note: Approaches is reported by TEA as any student who scores at or above that level, including those who scored at the Meets and Masters levels. The numbers above take the difference between reported Approaches and reported Meets to find the percent of students who scored at the Approaches level.

^{17b} Texas Education Agency. (2017). State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Performance Labels and Policy Definitions. Retrieved from: <https://tea.texas.gov/staarperformancelabelsandpolicydefinitions.pdf>

Parents are backing up what the data is telling us. Survey results show that less than two-thirds of public school parents are very or completely satisfied with their children’s schools. This finding also aligns with research demonstrating that since 2019, there has been a significant decline in parents who believe they have access to multiple high-quality public school options. Only one in five parents agreed that they have access to multiple good public school options to enroll their children, down from one in three in 2018.¹⁸ These feelings are consistent across families from different ethnic and racial backgrounds, as well as those whose children attend Houston’s traditional ISD and charter schools.

Beyond academic performance, schools are falling short in another way.

In conversations and focus groups, educators, parents, and students were asked, “What is the purpose of public K-12 education?” While responses varied, at the core, **families articulated a desire to give their children the skills and knowledge needed for social mobility.** This was not a surprise. Every generation of parents hopes that their children will have successful lives and the ability to compete for meaningful careers. What was unexpected, however, were the views held by families regarding our public schools’ capacity to assist students in achieving that objective. Good Reason Houston asked families and students, “What specific skills do you feel are missing from your current educational experience?” From students, a theme surfaced around a desire for more instruction intentionally geared to building their creativity, mental health, communication, and critical thinking. When asked the same question, family and community members highlighted practical life skills, critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, independence, and technological literacy.

Houston’s families are aligned with other stakeholders on what is required for future success. Five of the 10 skills named in the 2023 World Economic Forum’s Future Jobs report were those identified by Houston students and parents as critical components of a quality K-12 education.¹⁸

SKILLS RISING IN 2023

“These advanced skills will become more in demand as more technological advancements emerge.”¹⁹

Creative thinking • Analytical thinking • Technological literacy • Curiosity • Lifelong learning • Resilience, flexibility, and agility • Systems thinking • Artificial Intelligence (AI) and big data • Motivation and self-awareness • Talent management • Service orientation and customer service

¹⁸ Good Reason Houston Parent Opinion Poll. (2019 and 2022). Polls conducted by Wakefield Research. <https://goodreasonhouston.org/2023-parent-poll-insights-1/>

¹⁹ Zahidi, S. (2023). *The Future of Jobs Report 2023*. World Economic Forum. Retrieved from: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2023/in-full>

“Parents, students, business leaders, and the broad community all know that the expectations of the workforce are evolving. We must meet the academic needs of students while developing the skills they’ll each need to grow their value and competitive edge beyond their pre-K to 12 schooling. And we are at a critical moment in time as that skills gap increases. We have to get this right.”

– MIKE MILES, HISD SUPERINTENDENT²⁵

UpSkill Houston, an employer-led initiative that strengthens the pipeline of skilled workers and creates better pathways to opportunity, says: “Employers are placing a premium on soft and noncognitive skills... Industries struggle with an outdated perception about their work...”²⁰ Local organizations and businesses have begun to respond to this gap. This past Spring, Houston Back on Track, the job recovery arm of the Greater Houston Partnership, recognized the need for and is offering soft skills training.

Employers and families know that schools that prepare their students for the future must conquer the challenge of equipping them for jobs that might not yet exist.

Houston is asking its public schools to deliver the fundamentals – reading, writing, and arithmetic – and evolve in order to better equip young people with the advanced soft skills needed for an increasingly complex world. This push to include advanced soft skills alongside academic core knowledge aligns with a generation of students and families that are redefining what the pathway to postsecondary success looks like. We are increasingly seeing a workforce of young entrepreneurs, freelancers, contractors, social media content creators, influencers, professional gamers, and beyond.

Young adults are leveraging technology to join the labor market with less oversight and more control over their time. According to the Pew Research Center, independent workers rose from 27 percent of the workforce in 2016 to 36 percent in 2021, and the numbers continue to rise.²¹ The impact of artificial intelligence (AI) on the future of work is becoming clearer, placing even more importance on how schools are preparing students for an ever-evolving future.

Changing attitudes to work as we have known it means that even the best fact-based education will fall short of preparing students for the world of work they will enter.

Public education must expand our definition of quality education and recognize that college admission, military enlistment, and entering the workforce as we presently define it will not be good enough.

“As artificial intelligence continues to advance, the importance of advanced soft skills along with a strong foundation in the fundamentals and access to ongoing technical skill development cannot be overstated. The shift toward greater enterprise automation and AI suggests that all these skills will gain significance in workplace settings.”

**– BOB HARVEY, PRESIDENT & CEO
GREATER HOUSTON PARTNERSHIP²⁶**

²⁰ UpSkill. (n.d.). *Understanding Workforce Challenges: Factors Affecting the Growth of a Skilled Workforce*. Greater Houston Partnership. Retrieved from: <https://www.houston.org/upskillhouston>

²¹ Anderson, M., McClain, C., Faverio, M., & Gelles-Watnick, R. (2021). *The State of Gig Work in 2021*. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/12/08/the-state-of-gig-work-in-2021/>

²⁵ Good Reason Houston interview with Mike Miles (2023).

²⁶ Good Reason Houston interview with Bob Harvey (2023).

Living into the Moment

Houston can build on its legacy of embracing the challenge of change.

Houston is, and always has been, a leader in education reform. Houston has a history of realigning schools in response to the changing needs of the times and can adapt that strategy to meet this moment. Consider the following timeline:

● **1970s:** As the world's largest medical center was expanding and taking the lead in medical research and services, Houston public education met the moment by opening DeBakey High School, the nation's first high school for medical professions (1972).

● **1980s:** When the world started to change with continued technological advancements, Houston public education met the moment by redefining Red Elementary as the Math, Science, and Technology Magnet (1986). In direct response to the needs of a growing world, HISD helped to popularize STEM-focused learning across the city.

● **1990s:** The original goal of public school was not to prepare students for higher education, but once college was understood as a pathway to the middle class, Texas applied what we knew about supporting college success to the definition of "high-quality education." In July 1997, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS, were adopted as the state's first curriculum standards. These standards were designed to build what students needed to be on track for high school graduation and college readiness, one grade level at a time.

Public schools in Houston accepted the challenge of preparing all students to be "college ready." College-prep charter schools like KIPP and YES Prep were founded in Houston, promising "college for all" to families in the most underresourced communities. Districts also rose to the occasion. In response to concerns about equity, HISD expanded its Advanced Placement offerings across Title I high schools.

● **2000s:** In the early 2000s, when data began to show the value of early college for under-resourced communities, Houston districts opened doors to early college high schools across the city.

During that same period, public education again responded to the needs of families by expanding readiness goals to include career destinations available to young adults who were not pursuing a college degree. In 2006, Texas became the first state to adopt College & Career Readiness standards, acknowledging that preparation for careers that do not require a college degree is just as valuable as a college-focused education.

That same year, Spring ISD opened the new Carl Wunsche High School where the goal is “to develop citizens who are well prepared for their future, whether students choose to enter the workforce directly or move on to higher education.”²²

In 2013, HISD became the first two-time Broad prize winner for their forward-thinking approaches to closing the gap between what was being taught in classrooms and the technical skills needed for the workforce.

2020s: A Paradigm Shift

Statewide, a bridge between brain science and educational practitioners was being built. Decades of research was making its way from the field of brain science into educational practice. For the first time, public education was actively applying the science around how students learn, how brains develop, and how knowledge, skills, and competencies are acquired to teaching strategies. Armed with research about the central role of knowledge in facilitating thinking and the development of soft skills, there is tremendous potential for Houston to prepare students for long-term success.

Research shows, when we talk about raising the academic bar and providing students with advanced soft skills, it cannot be an either-or. The two cannot live in separate classes or be set apart in an elective or specialized course. Rather, to impart students with soft skills, edu-

cators must help students build an extensive knowledge base. The more one knows about a topic, the more the topic can be explored. Knowledge can then be creatively adapted and applied to different scenarios, critical thinking, debate, writing, persuasion, etc. Strong academics, then, lay the foundation for students to grow soft skills naturally and automatically; thus, better preparing them to meet the demands of an ever-changing world.²³

INCORPORATING BRAIN SCIENCE

Cognitive science argues that soft skills such as critical thinking, creativity, etc. are not inherently transferable. True critical thinking in any subject area requires a foundation of subject area knowledge. Knowledge, then, is no longer a collection of facts that we want students to simply remember but instead becomes “what you think with.”

Incorporating brain science into educational practice gives us a clear way to “develop more effective learning environments and instructional processes, including, for example, the explicit teaching of practical metacognitive, cognitive, and social skills to enhance the academic achievement of all students.”

Texas is acting on what it has learned from brain science: Education reform is shifting its focus from outputs to inputs.

Policymakers are expanding their thinking – shifting from creating lists of standards that outline what students should learn to vetting curriculum (what is being taught) and pedagogy (how best to teach it).

²² Spring ISD (n.d.). School Choice / Carl Wunsche Sr. High School. Retrieved from <https://www.springisd.org/Page/6053>

²³ Sweller, J. (2022). Some Critical Thoughts about Critical and Creative Thinking. The Centre for Independent Studies. Retrieved from: <https://www.cis.org.au/publication/some-critical-thoughts-about-critical-and-creative-thinking/>

More emphasis is being placed on using brain science to 1) identify those materials that best allow students to deeply and meaningfully engage in the learning, and 2) identify research-based instructional practices that best tell us how to teach, all in an effort to improve instruction.

By May 2023, Washington, D.C. and 31 states enacted laws around the implementation of the science of reading in public schools. Texas was no exception. Here are a few examples of policies demonstrating how Texas lawmakers are creating conditions for change:

- **HB 3 (2019):** Required all teachers in Kindergarten to third grade and teacher candidates for pre-K to sixth grade certification to be trained in the science of teaching reading (how best to teach).
- **HB 3906 (2019):** Established standards for the redesigned STAAR, which features a multiple choice cap and a renewed focus on reading and writing (with an extended response or essay at each grade level) intended to increase instructional alignment and prioritize background knowledge, vocabulary, and critical thinking in all content areas (what is being taught).
- **HB 1605 (2023):** Incentivized public school districts to adopt approved high-quality instructional materials and state-owned Open Education Resources as a means to provide teachers with grade-level standards-aligned resources that can be adapted to fit students' needs (what is being taught).

With supporting policy, resources, tools, and research, Houston has what is needed to move toward a system that is responsive to the changing times – a system that provides students with a robust foundation of academic knowledge with which to intentionally build the advanced soft skills that students will need for postsecondary success.

SHIFTS IN HOUSTON

Bright spots already exist in Houston where leaders are making transformational shifts grounded in the science of learning.

Aldine ISD, in partnership with Transcend Education, is implementing a Whole Child Model across 10 elementary campuses.

The Whole Child Model intentionally creates a school experience that focuses on the development of the whole child. It places an emphasis on students' socio-emotional growth and the development of soft skills; giving students what they need to develop their interpersonal and intrapersonal skills.

Living into the Moment

The bridge connecting brain science and educational practitioners has promise, but it must get to our campuses and our students.

Public education will benefit from this policy shift away from “drill and kill” assessment-driven culture to one that is grounded in what it is being taught, how it is being taught, and how we measure what was learned. To reach students, policy must turn into practice and be embraced by everyone from system leaders to classroom teachers. This is an important step toward reinvigorating the public’s belief in school systems and meet the expectations of parents, students, and community members alike. To get there, we must:

- 1. Collectively Educate Ourselves:** We must improve the collective understanding of the shifts that are taking place and how they raise the bar for academic knowledge while concurrently building up soft skills. School systems should support their teams to understand what instructional shifts are required to better align with the brain science that leads to increased academic performance and the acquisition of soft skills. This deeper understanding of the intersection between curriculum, pedagogy, and assessment must extend from leaders to teachers to families. By authentically engaging and educating families, we reduce barriers and increase involvement. A common understanding serves as the bedrock from which strategies emerge and complex problems are solved.
- 2. Strategic and Thoughtful Implementation:** Teachers must feel supported and well-equipped to effectively utilize new thinking to improve student outcomes. Instructional leaders must use feedback, an assortment of data (e.g., student performance data, teacher survey data, etc.), and research-based adult learning principles to provide staff with purposeful professional development and training. Districts must be strategic and thoughtful when changes are rolled out. We must acknowledge the weight that this paradigm shift has on both educators and students and plan strategically the how, when, and why of changes. Supporting our campus staff through this change is of the utmost priority.
- 3. Embracing, Not Dismissing, Discourse:** Discussions about public education need to honor Houston’s diversity and differing opinions. With any change comes discomfort. We should embrace it, talk about it, and encourage others to think outside of the box. Education leaders and community leaders representing diverse and emerging fields in Houston should dedicate time to grappling with future challenges and identify how education must proactively evolve to support success. Unless we embrace the changing world and discuss how we as a city can change with it, we further risk losing students and alienating the families we serve. When planning and implementing changes, policymakers and district leaders should actively engage with and listen to those closest to, and most impacted by, this work: the students, teachers, and parents.

4. Be Patient, while Acting with Urgency: Change takes time, and relies on everyone working toward a common goal. As we shift direction, we may initially experience undesirable outcomes (e.g., a drop in state assessment scores or school grades); however, we should stay focused on the change that needs to happen. In this moment more than any other in our lifetime, we must lean into the old adage: don't throw the baby out with the bath water. As we innovate, obstacles will arise. When that happens, we will need to rise to the occasion, pivot, and keep focused on the end goal. Utilizing brain science to ensure students are receiving an equitable education that prepares them for the future is the right path. We must be thoughtful about how much is rolled out at once, how we continually measure milestones toward our goal, and how we use a diverse set of voices to constantly reflect and readjust.

“What happens in Houston matters. This is where, for better or worse, the American future is going to be worked out. By 2050, all of America will have the same demographic mix as Houston today... Houston has been getting many things right in its efforts to enhance the city’s prospects in the 21st century... Where the city is failing most spectacularly is in its seeming inability to invest in its citizens, to significantly expand area residents’ access to high-quality lifelong education. These are the investments that will ultimately determine whether or not Houston is positioned for lasting success in today’s high-technology, knowledge-based, global economy.”

– DR. STEPHEN KLINEBERG,
Demographics Expert and Sociologist²⁴

²⁴ Klineberg, S. (2023, February 21). *To become the city the future needs it to be, Houston must invest in its people more than ever before.* Rice University, Kinder Institute for Urban Research. Retrieved from: <https://kinder.rice.edu/urbanedge/become-city-future-needs-it-be-houston-must-invest-its-people-more-ever>



Conclusion

Understandably, some Houstonians feel tired of the constant changes in education. It is important to recognize that the theory of action is evolving. Instead of focusing solely on outputs and achieving good results, we are now taking into account decades of research on brain science. This shift is long overdue and has the potential to greatly benefit students by optimizing their learning so they are well equipped to conquer the challenge of an evolving and unpredictable future.

Regardless of what a student decides to do after high school: be a freelancer, entrepreneur, go to college, enter the military, enter a trade, or build a social media empire, they will always need a combination of strong academic and advanced soft skills. To truly prepare our students for the future, we must rethink what that means and how we define all aspects of the public school system. We must embrace the shifts in our educational system and listen to those we serve. We are at a pivotal point in time.

Families, students, and employers are clear about what they want from the public school educational experience: a focus on advanced soft skills such as critical thinking, creativity, adaptability, independence, and technology literacy AND a strong foundation in academic knowledge.

How we approach teaching and learning and how we measure the effectiveness of school systems in preparing students for the future is shifting. While we believe it is shifting in the right direction, we also believe momentum is needed to both accelerate and guide the direction. While there are challenges, Houston has a legacy of leading change in education. The city has a history of responding to the evolving needs of its students. Houston's commitment to education reform, coupled with its experience in developing standards and innovative programs, positions it well to lead the education transformation.

Houston can reinvigorate public trust in education's ability to prepare students for the future. This journey will require collaboration, innovation, and a steadfast commitment to equipping students with the knowledge and advanced soft skills they need to navigate a rapidly changing future. Houston has the potential to be a beacon of educational excellence, ensuring that all children are prepared to succeed. **Houston, can we come together to meet this moment?**

What can you do to learn more?

1. Review our [Annual Houston Public Education Snapshot](#) to see how Houston is progressing against five key indicators that tell us how effectively our public schools are preparing students.
2. Visit our [Data Dashboard](#) to better understand what the data is telling us about how schools are serving students academically across demographic groups.
3. Read our **Quarterly Education Insights Reports** and associated **blog posts** as we continue to explore the ways Houston can meet the moment.
4. Follow [@GoodReasonHouston](#) on social media to stay connected to education news and data.
5. Subscribe to our **newsletter** to get Houston education news delivered right to your inbox.

References

1. City of Houston (2023). About Houston: Facts and Figures. Retrieved from <https://www.houston.tx.gov/about/houston/houstonfacts.html>
2. Texas Education Agency (2022). PEIMS Enrollment Report 2022-2023. Retrieved from <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/adhocrpt/adste.html>
3. Spector, C. (2023, February). What happened to students who left public schools during the pandemic? New Stanford-led research tracks their paths. Stanford News. Retrieved from <https://news.stanford.edu/2023/02/08/happened-students-left-public-schools-pandemic-new-stanford-led-research-tracks-paths/>
4. Texas Education Agency. (2023). Texas Academic Performance Reports, 2021-2022. Retrieved from <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/2022/index.html>
5. Hamilton BE, Martin JA, Osterman MJK. (2021, May). Births: Provisional data for 2020. Vital Statistics Rapid Release. Retrieved from <https://www.cdc.gov/nchs/data/vsrr/vsrr012-508.pdf>
6. U.S. Census Bureau. (2011 and 2021). S1302: Fertility, American Community Survey 5-year estimates, 2011 and 2021. Retrieved from: <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSST5Y2011.S1301?q=birth+rates+in+houston+city&t=Fertility>
7. Suskind, D. (2022, April 22). Essay: America is running out of babies – Texas could be a life line. Houston Chronicle. Retrieved from <https://www.houstonchronicle.com/opinion/outlook/article/Essay-America-is-running-out-of-babies-Texas-17119650.php>.
8. Dulin, M. (2023, February 15). Public school enrollment is facing a ‘demographic bubble.’ Urban districts are already seeing its effects. Rice University, Kinder Institute for Urban Research. Retrieved from <https://kinder.rice.edu/urbanedge/public-school-enrollment-facing-demographic-bubble-urban-districts-are-already-seeing-its>
9. Report compiled by Kitamba with data sourced from: National Center for Health Statistics, final natality data. American Community Survey, Census Bureau
10. Texas Education Agency. (2023). Texas Public Education Information Resource (TPEIR): Texas Public Prekindergarten Programs and Enrollment Ages 3 and 4 2022. Retrieved from <https://www.texaseducationinfo.org/Home/Topic/Prekindergarten%20Programs?br=PK-12>
11. Eggleston, C. and Fields, J. (2021). Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey Shows Significant Increase in Homeschooling Rates in Fall 2020. United States Census Bureau. Retrieved from: <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2021/03/homeschooling-on-the-rise-during-covid-19-pandemic.html>
12. Good Reason Houston interview with Texas Home Educators Network. (September 2023)

13. Good Reason Houston interview with Home Grown Homeschoolers Inc. (September 2023)
14. National Alliance for Public Charter Schools. (2022). Never Going Back: An Analysis of Parent Sentiment in Education. Retrieved from: <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED625440>
15. Good Reason Houston Parent Opinion Poll. (2019 and 2022). Polls conducted by Wakefield Research. <https://goodreasonhouston.org/2023-parent-poll-insights-1/>
16. Good Reason Houston interview with Dr. Anthony Mays. (2023).
17. Texas Education Agency. (2023). STAAR Aggregate Data, 2014-2023. Retrieved from <https://tea.texas.gov/student-assessment/testing/staar/staar-aggregate-data>
- 17b. Texas Education Agency. (2017). State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR) Performance Labels and Policy Definitions. Retrieved from: <https://tea.texas.gov/staarperformance/labelsandpolicydefinitions.pdf>
18. Good Reason Houston Parent Opinion Poll. (2019 and 2022). Polls conducted by Wakefield Research. <https://goodreasonhouston.org/2023-parent-poll-insights-1/>
19. Zahidi, S. (2023). The Future of Jobs Report 2023. World Economic Forum. Retrieved from: <https://www.weforum.org/reports/the-future-of-jobs-report-2023/in-full>
20. UpSkill. (n.d.). Understanding Workforce Challenges: Factors Affecting the Growth of a Skilled Workforce. Greater Houston Partnership. Retrieved from: <https://www.houston.org/upskillhouston>
21. Anderson, M., McClain, C., Faverio, M., & Gelles-Watnick, R. (2021). The State of Gig Work in 2021. Pew Research Center. Retrieved from: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2021/12/08/the-state-of-gig-work-in-2021/>
22. Spring ISD (n.d.). *School Choice / Carl Wunsche Sr. High School*. Retrieved from <https://www.springisd.org/Page/6053>
23. Sweller, J. (2022). Some Critical Thoughts about Critical and Creative Thinking. The Centre for Independent Studies. Retrieved from: <https://www.cis.org.au/publication/some-critical-thoughts-about-critical-and-creative-thinking/>
24. Klineberg, S. (2023, February 21). *To become the city the future needs it to be, Houston must invest in its people more than ever before*. Rice University, Kinder Institute for Urban Research. Retrieved from: <https://kinder.rice.edu/urbanedge/become-city-future-needs-it-be-houston-must-invest-its-people-more-ever>
25. Good Reason Houston interview with Mike Miles (2023).
26. Good Reason Houston interview with Bob Harvey (2023).

