



## Key Takeaways: June 2018

Houston is home to 17 different school districts, with the Houston Independent School District (HISD) serving families in the center of the city. A looming state takeover, which may happen in fall 2018, has dominated conversation in the city over the past year, highlighting weaknesses in governance, vision, and community engagement. However, this crisis point could provide an opportunity to reassess education strategy and begin to build a citywide vision for Houston's school system. The city's 150 charter schools, mayor's office, and active nonprofit and business sectors should be involved in establishing that vision. This conversation must include a sustainable strategy to improve the city's schools and improve access to existing quality options.

### Challenges Ahead

#### ► Working across sectors and districts to develop a vision for education

HISD is one of 17 districts serving students in the Houston area, although it is the only one to serve the metropolitan area. Interviewees in Houston noted a lack of vision for education for the metropolitan center, and the lack of leadership to drive it. HISD's board has long been divided, so is not a natural place to look for leadership. The city has several single-issue task forces and the [Greater Houston Partnership](#), but no task force guides a strategic, citywide plan and none has authority to take action. In 2016 the mayor created Houston's first Office of Education, which is guiding initiatives and serves as a central hub for convening all city districts. The key to developing greater leadership in either of these existing conveners, or through a new nonprofit, will be to move beyond single-issue items toward citywide, strategic actions. A task force must also include district, charter, and nonprofit leaders, and develop MOUs to reinforce responsibility for following through on action items.

#### ► Developing a menu of options to improve HISD schools

In 2015 Texas passed [HB 1842](#) requiring a district to close or turn around consistently underperforming schools, or face state intervention. In April 2017 the HISD school board could not agree on a plan for its most persistently struggling schools: the state could close the schools or replace the local school board if August 2018 test scores do not show improvement in any of four identified schools. The process was marked by contentious debate and revealed two key tensions for Houstonians: what types of organizations can play a role in district school improvement and how can community input be effectively incorporated into the education strategy. Regardless of possible state intervention, HISD must develop a menu of options with community input. In 2017 the district launched [Achieve 180](#), which provides differentiated supports to identified schools, resulting in preliminary [gains](#). But HISD should develop additional options. If partnering with charter schools is not possible to accomplish turnaround, the district could work with local nonprofits, universities, or the mayor's office; these groups must work together now to build capacity. Establishing a family-centered process for school closure is also needed. A phased-out, district-managed school closure is better for families than a last-minute, state enforced closure, as long as it is paired with supports so students can attend a higher-performing school. HISD could also consider developing district leaders and teachers for turnaround and restart.

#### ► Increasing access to high-quality school options

HISD is home to a number of high-quality magnet schools. However, there is [well-documented](#) inequity in the magnet system because of application requirements and other enrollment restrictions. Former superintendent Richard Carranza started conversations to reassess HISD's magnet schools so all families could have access to

the quality education that magnets provide. The new superintendent, when elected, should carry forth this important conversation. Shrinking neighborhood schools can be reopened as magnet options to attract families. New magnets can open with a diverse-by-design model to ensure economic diversity within the student body, as [has been tried](#) in other Texas cities. And selected magnets can transition to an open-enrollment approach, which can be done without compromising rigor by providing student supports. Within the charter sector, Houston is home to many high-performing charter schools. However, YES Prep and KIPP Public Charter Schools are the only networks that provide free transportation to all students. Other charter networks and schools should prioritize transport—even if it is by offering subsidies to parents who drive students to school or organizing parent carpools. Houston’s sprawling geography and few public transit options make it a poor candidate for bus passes now, but transportation is a citywide concern, so charter leaders can continue to work with civic leaders through forums like the Great Houston Partnership to advocate for the expansion of public transit options.

## Spotlight

### 20,000 Families Use New 10-Minute Process to Apply to Multiple Schools

Families living in the center of Houston have a number of options when it comes to school choice. They can apply to HISD magnet schools, HISD schools outside of the neighborhood boundary, schools in other districts, and charter schools. But even for families who know they have choice, navigating and making sense of the options remains a major challenge.

And for a city with as much school choice as Houston, it falters when it comes to streamlining the process for families. As of June 2018 there was still no information guide providing academic and curricular information for all schools and no common application or unified enrollment system.

To start to improve the application process, the regional nonprofit [Families Empowered](#) launched [Apply Houston](#) in 2017. Over 20,000 families applied during the first year's application window. And for the first time in Houston, the year's application data across schools will be used to help identify demand trends.

The portal streamlines only the application process—enrollment and lotteries are still run by individual schools or networks—and in the inaugural year the portal only accounted for about 50 of the city's 156 charter schools.

But this is still a significant step toward making school choice easier for families, especially those who have fewer resources. And the portal is an excellent example of starting to streamline wherever possible—in this case, among willing charter networks. Looking forward for Houston parents, a truly streamlined choice system should first include unified enrollment for all charter schools, and then for all choice options.

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### Nonprofit Uses Census Data to Help First-Generation Latino Families Navigate School Options

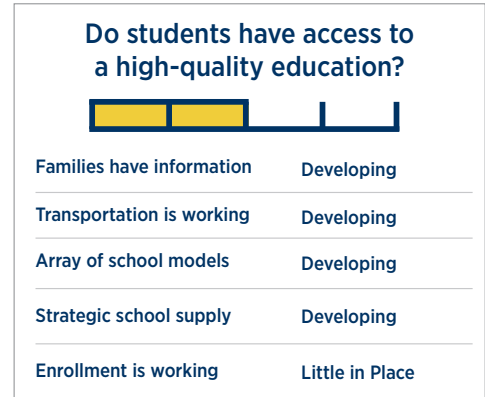
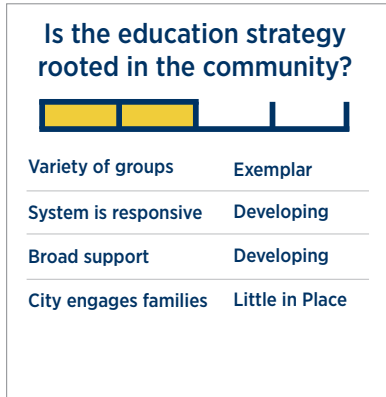
White students in Houston are disproportionately represented in the city's highest-performing schools: although they make up 10% of the student population, white students are **3 times more likely** than Latino students to be in high-performing K–8 schools.

In 2017 the Texas nonprofit organization [Children at Risk](#) expanded its services to help first-generation Latino families understand and navigate the school system.

Children at Risk used census data to find the areas with the highest proportion of Latino households and low-performing schools. Then its staff worked with community groups already active in those neighborhoods to train families to identify a quality school and understand their options for out-of-neighborhood transfers.

Children at Risk hopes to broaden its impact in the future. This will start by learning lessons from the 2017 pilot—like incentivizing families to attend workshops by providing child care, food, and transportation.

## System Reforms



Each indicator is scored with a rubric on a 4-point scale. We added the scores for the indicators to get an overall goal score. An arrow shows increase or decrease from the 2017 score.

## Key Takeaways: System Reforms

Houston has strong nonprofits, business groups, and funders that support education programs across the city. However, the city struggles to unite to forge a common vision for its portfolio of schools. Inequity in school access also remains an issue. Over the past year, several large charter school networks coordinated their application processes to improve access to choice options, but citywide enrollment, information, and transportation are not coordinated.

### Is the education strategy rooted in the community?



**Is the whole community engaged?** Education is a citywide endeavor. When families, community organizations, and city leaders have the opportunity to provide feedback and share in the vision, the strategy is more likely to be sustainable and meet the needs of all students. In this goal, we look at how well the city is doing with engaging key stakeholders.



#### Are a variety of groups engaged in education?

Houston is a vibrant city with many groups and cross-sector partnerships involved in education. The mayor’s office works with districts, post-secondary institutions, and nonprofits on general and single-issue initiatives, including [Out2Learn](#), a citywide collaboration to increase access to out-of-time learning. The [Greater Houston Partnership](#) leads two education-related initiatives and convenes charter, district, and business leaders to discuss common issues like transportation. [United for College Success](#) convenes eight charter management organizations (CMOs) and three districts, including HISD, to improve college attendance and persistence. The [Houston ISD Foundation](#) coordinates foundation support for HISD. [Families Empowered](#) and [Children at Risk](#) work with low-income families to educate them about school quality and help them navigate the choice process. Houston is home to an active faith-based community and other education-related nonprofits like [Leadership ISD](#), which operates a fellowship to prepare civic leaders for work in education advocacy and governance.



**Does the education system respond to community feedback?**

HISD and charter networks recognize the need to improve their responsiveness to families. HISD’s mechanisms for input include listening tours, livestream superintendent Q&As, and online voting. The city’s larger CMOs are beginning to work with parent engagement specialists. However, interviewees noted that there is still work to be done to reach high-poverty communities and provide avenues for engagement. School councils are a key way for families to engage with HISD, but the most well-developed councils are in magnet option schools or in affluent neighborhoods.



**Is there a strong and deep coalition of support for the education strategy?**

Houston’s current mayor, Sylvester Turner, is involved in several citywide education initiatives—a marked difference from past administrations. His Mayoral Task Force on Equity released the report *Rising Together* that includes several education-related recommendations, and his Office of Education releases education reports and policy suggestions. Interviewees noted that the HISD school board is fractured and lacks the trust of the community. [HoustonGPS](#) has been working to improve the quality and accountability of the school board.



**Does the city engage families in educational decisions that impact them?**

In 2017-18, public discussion about closing or transforming district schools was frequent, but revealed weaknesses in the ability of HISD’s board to respond to and incorporate community input. HISD [hosted 13 meetings](#) in February and March to talk with families about schools identified on the state’s “improvement required” list. The final plan was announced only days before the board’s vote; community outcry led to the plan being rejected. We do not have information about engagement processes related to school openings. Within the charter sector, charter schools by law must work with local communities prior to opening or closing schools, but the quality of engagement varies by school.

**Is the education system continuously improving?**



**Do schools have the resources they need?** School improvement happens at the school level, but making sure resources are available requires sound, citywide policy. Having the right talent in a city is critical for schools to be able to provide students with a quality education. Schools should also have control over their budgets so they have the resources to address the needs of their student population.



**Does funding equitably follow students?**

HISD has a student-based allocation formula that provides district principals with some discretion over spending decisions. This equates to 43% of district expenditures according to an [Edunomics](#) analysis. In 2018, community interviewees noted concern that struggling schools do not have the resources they need to serve students. Charter schools receive fewer dollars on a per-student basis than district schools and receive no facilities funding from the state (based on an analysis of fiscal year 2017-18).



**Do schools have the kinds of teachers they need?**

Interviewees noted that attracting and retaining high-quality teachers is a challenge for HISD and local charter schools. Several strategies are in place to address this: In partnership with the University of Houston, the district launched [Teach Forward Houston](#), which recruits new teachers from graduated high school students. YES Prep, a large charter network, has a state-authorized alternative certification program, [Teaching Excellence](#), that includes several Houston-area charter schools and districts (HISD does not currently participate). Smaller charter schools, without their own pipelines in place, struggle the most to recruit and retain teachers.



**Do schools have the kinds of leaders they need?**

Interviewees noted that it can be challenging to find quality leadership for district and charter schools. To address this, HISD hosts the [School Leadership Academy](#), which offers a pathway for teachers to become deans and assistant principals. CMOs also develop leaders from within, although there is a perception within the charter sector that some leaders are promoted before they are ready. There is no coordinated effort within the charter sector or with Houston-area districts to cultivate school leadership.

**Do students have access to a high-quality education?**



**Do school choice and supply meet family needs?** This goal addresses how well the city is doing with providing families access to quality schools. We look at what the city is doing to ensure quality schools are in every neighborhood, and how well the choice process is working for families who want to use it.



**Do families have the information they need and know how to use it?**

Interviewees noted that families with children requiring English language learner or special education services face the greatest barriers to finding a good-fit school. Houston lacks a consolidated guide that has academic *and* programmatic information for all schools. Families Empowered publishes a [school directory](#) with links to school websites, and the statewide nonprofit Children at Risk provides comparable academic information through its [Texas School Guide](#). Both groups also support families through the choice process.



**Is transportation working for families?**

HISD provides yellow bus transport to students in magnet schools and assigned neighborhood schools outside a two-mile walk zone. KIPP and YES Prep also provide free transportation. However, families with children who attend schools outside their neighborhood zone and those attending most charter schools must arrange their own transportation. Given the size of the city, families who do not have private transportation find that distance poses a significant obstacle to getting their child to a higher-performing school or to a program they prefer.



**Does the school supply represent an array of models?**

HISD has a strong magnet program that accounts for about 10% of all schools in the city. However, over three-quarters of those magnet schools have enrollment restrictions—in 2017 and 2018, there was some discussion about making programs more accessible to families. Traditionally, Houston has been dominated by a few large CMOs, but single charters or small, local networks still make up a third of all charter schools that opened between 2014 and 2017. Among them is [BakerRipley](#), a community center that operates schools using a wrap-around services approach. Charter networks IDEA and International Leadership for Texas are planning to expand into Houston.



**Is the city strategically managing its school portfolio?**

A 2015 state law, [HB 1842](#), sets clear criteria for improving district schools that have been underperforming for five consecutive years, and the Texas Education Agency is a strong charter school authorizer that takes action on low-performing charters. In 2017, HISD launched a strategy to improve 45 underperforming schools: [Achieve 180](#). In terms of school expansion and siting, there is demand for more high-quality charter, magnet, and district schools citywide. There is no transparent data to guide school siting decisions, especially around demand or projected enrollment. However, charter network YES Prep provides [a promising example](#) by conducting its own analyses so it can strategically expand where schools are most needed. We did not have information about HISD’s criteria for opening or expanding schools.



**Is the enrollment process working for families?**

In 2017, five charter networks in Houston launched a common application portal, [Apply Houston](#). In the first year, the portal was used by about one-third of all charter schools in the city. This is an improvement for families, but application and enrollment for schools of choice—charter or district—remain complicated. Non-participating charter schools and district schools have multiple competing deadlines, and lotteries are still controlled at the school level.

**Data & Scoring**

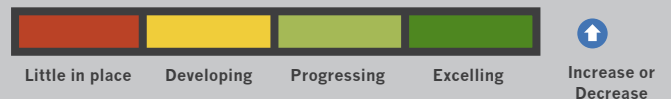
**Where did we get this information?**

- ▶ Interviews with district, charter, and community leaders
- ▶ Policy documents from district, charter, and state websites
- ▶ School data from each city
- ▶ A 400-parent survey administered in March, 2017 in Cleveland, Denver, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, Oakland, and Washington, D.C.

**How did we score the system reforms and goals?**

- ▶ Each indicator is scored with a rubric on a 4-point scale. We added the scores for the indicators to get an overall goal score. See the [Methodology & Resources](#) page for details.

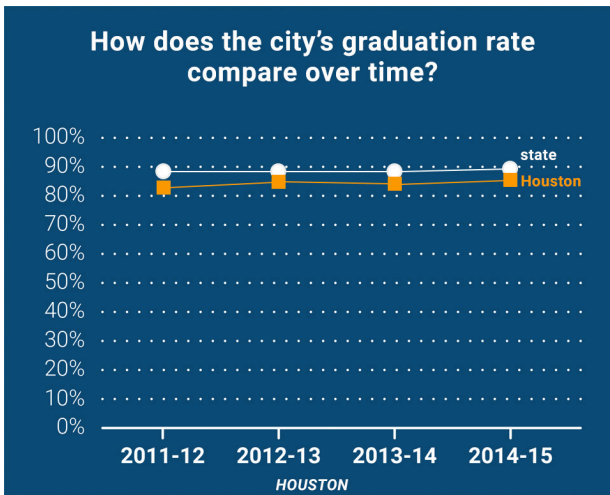
**Score Levels**



## Key Takeaways: Student & School Outcomes

Houston’s graduation rate has improved over time to be about on par with the state’s. In other areas, our measures show strong outcomes overall, but some stagnation. Students have fairly equitable access to advanced coursework in high school, and low-income students perform slightly better in math and reading than their peers nationally. Proficiency rates in Houston were about on par with state averages in 2014-15, but the city made no gains over four years in math and fell behind in reading.

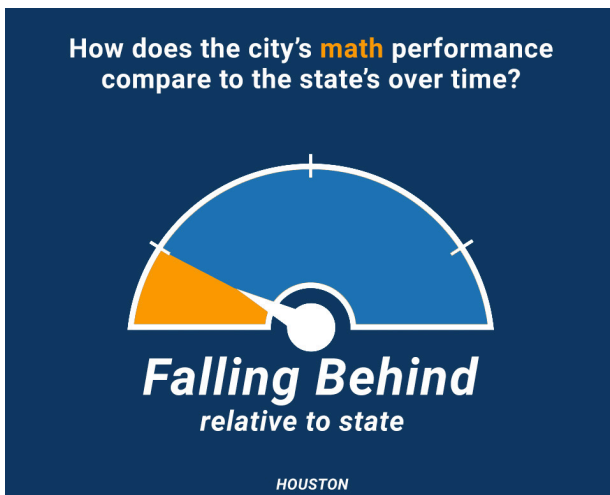
### Is the education system continuously improving?



► Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the city’s graduation rate improved. In 2014-15, the city’s graduation rate was about on par with the state’s.

Data: Percent of first-time 9th grade students graduating in four years, citywide and statewide.

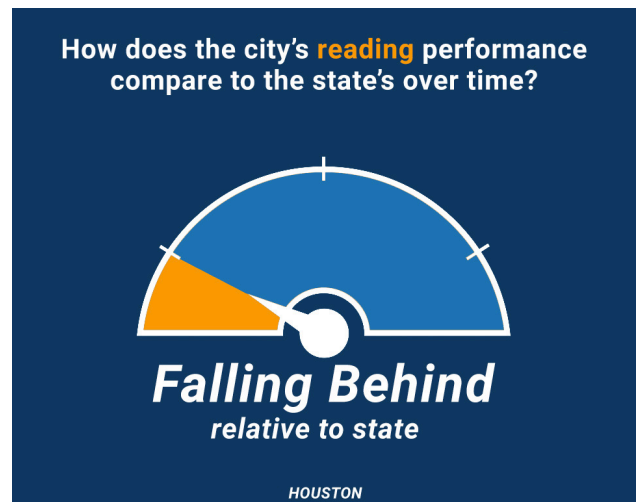
Source: EDFacts Initiative, U.S. Department of Education, Assessment and Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rates Data, 2011-12 to 2014-15.



► Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the city’s proficiency rate trends in math mirrored the state’s. In 2014-15 the city’s proficiency rate was 4 percentage points below the state average.

Data: The city’s estimated gains in proficiency rates across elementary and middle schools, standardized at the state level and controlling for student demographics.

Source: Texas Education Agency, 2010-11 to 2014-15; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010-11 to 2014-15.



► Between 2011-12 and 2014-15, the reading proficiency rate gap between the city and state widened. In 2015, the city’s proficiency rate was 5 percentage points below the state average.

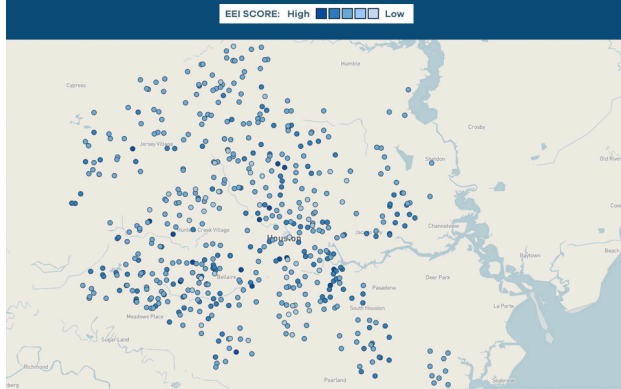
Data: The city’s estimated gains in proficiency rates across elementary and middle schools, standardized at the state level and controlling for student demographics.

Source: Texas Education Agency, 2010-11 to 2014-15; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010-11 to 2014-15.



## Do students have access to a high-quality education?

Does every neighborhood have a school that provides a quality education to low-income students?

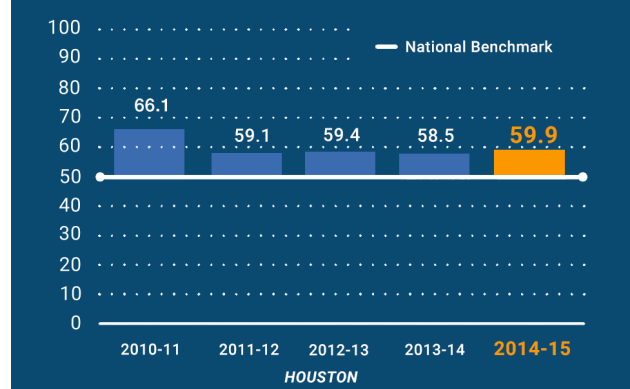


- ▶ The Education Equality Index (EEI) identifies how students from low-income families are performing in cities and schools across the country. See this interactive tool to explore individual school performance.

Data: The Education Equality Index (EEI) was supplied by Education Cities and GreatSchools. See their site for more detail.

Source: U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection 2013-2014.

How are low-income students performing relative to the national benchmark?

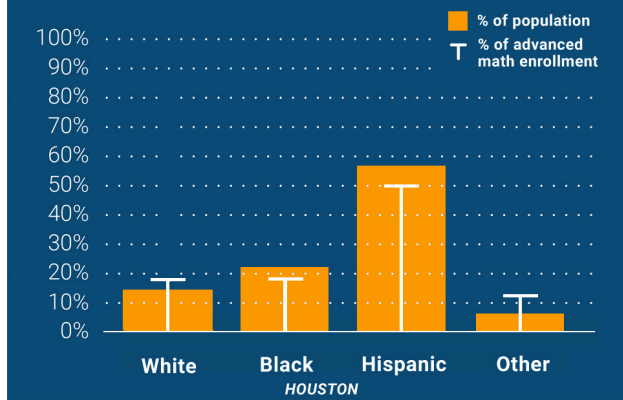


- ▶ Students from low-income families in Houston are performing somewhat better in math and reading than low-income students in the average city. EEI scores in Houston have decreased by 2% over time.

Data: The Education Equality Index (EEI) was supplied by Education Cities and GreatSchools. See their site for more detail.

Source: Texas Education Agency, 2010-11 to 2014-15; National Assessment of Educational Progress, 2010-11 to 2014-15.

How does participation in advanced math courses compare across groups?



- ▶ In 2013-14, all student sub-groups in the city were enrolled in advanced math coursework at a similar rate as the high school population.

Data: Enrollment of students in math courses above Algebra II. Rates calculated by dividing the number of students enrolled in advanced math by the number of students in the school. Sub-group rates determined at the school level.

Source: U.S. Department of Education's Office of Civil Rights, Civil Rights Data Collection 2013-2014.

## Data & Scoring

### Where did we get this data?

- ▶ Publicly available state and federal data, making our results comparable and reproducible.
- ▶ The most up-to-date data available for all 18 cities at the time of our data collection. See [Methodology & Resources](#) for more information.

### What makes the data citywide?

- ▶ We include all charter and district schools within the municipal boundary of a city.
- ▶ In Houston, Indianapolis, Memphis, New Orleans, and San Antonio we use school data from multiple districts within the municipal boundary.

## About Houston

Houston is a city with a large geographic footprint that includes 17 school districts—many of which serve students outside the city limits—and 156 charter schools within its municipal boundaries. Houston Independent School District (HISD), the seventh largest district in the country, serves families living in the center of the city. Superintendent Richard Carranza stepped down in March 2018 to become chancellor of New York City Schools. Chief Academic Officer Grenita Lathan was unanimously voted in as interim superintendent and enjoys strong local support.

## School Choice in the City

All families in Houston are assigned to a neighborhood school. HISD allows for out-of-district transfers and has a number of transfer options for its own schools, including magnet programs, public education grants, and space-available transfers. Most charter schools are open enrollment and do not have specific neighborhood zones. Texas law allows for inter-district choice, so students can apply for enrollment in other Houston-area districts.

## Governance Model

HISD is the main district in the city, but there are 17 other districts in the greater metropolitan area. All districts are governed by a locally elected school board. Most charters in the city are authorized by the Texas Education Agency.

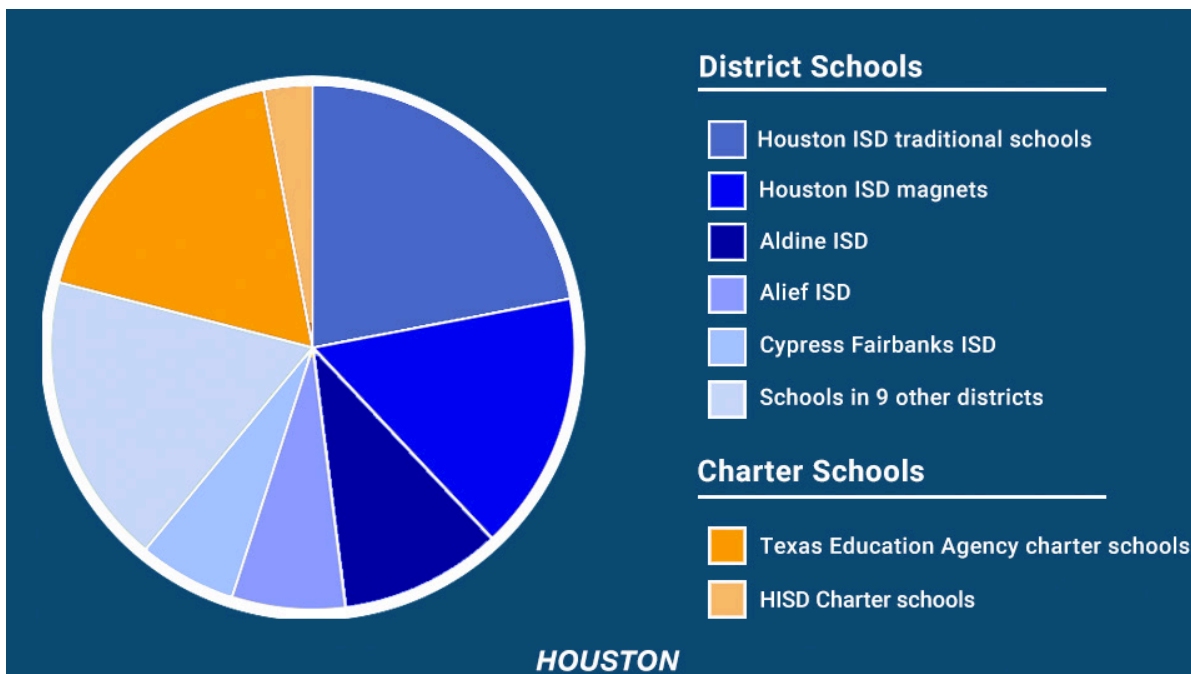
## 2015 District and Charter Student Body

Enrollment: 579,609 students

Race and ethnicity: 60% Hispanic, 24% black, 9% white, 7% other

Low-income: 73% free and reduced-price lunch

## 2017 School Composition



School data from researcher analysis of public records, 2016-17.  
Source: Enrollment data from EDFacts, 2014-15.

## About This Project

The Citywide Education Progress Report looks at how a city is doing across three goals:

- The education system is continuously improving
- All students have access to a high-quality education
- The education strategy is rooted in the community

Across each goal we present indicators of what the cities are doing (what we call “system reforms”) and how they are doing (what we call “outcomes”).

Our city reports focus on education strategies for the 2017-18 school year. Our analyses reflect developments through June 2018. These are updates to our original reports from the 2016-17 school year.

To understand how well cities are doing, we used state and federal data to track school improvement, graduation rates, and student access to high-quality schools. Our student and school data cover the 2011-2012 to 2014-2015 school years. To understand city strategies and identify early progress, we relied on interviews, surveys, public documents, and news articles from 2014-2015 to the present. This analysis uses data for district and charter schools to look at all schools within municipal boundaries, rather than just one sector or district.

We cannot say that employing a certain strategy will lead to a particular result, or even whether a particular strategy is effective in these cities. But the reports can help us to see how a strategy is working, what problem areas remain, and which cities are seeing promising results.

The 18 cities in this study include Atlanta, Boston, Camden, Cleveland, Chicago, Denver, Houston, Indianapolis, Kansas City, Los Angeles, Memphis, New Orleans, New York City, Oakland, Philadelphia, San Antonio, Tulsa, and Washington, D.C.

To learn more about the project, compare other cities, and read the cross-city analysis, visit:  
[research.crpe.org/projects/stepping-up](https://research.crpe.org/projects/stepping-up)



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