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Report critiques how Texas districts send students to alternative schools

Referrals depend on where kids live, not their behavior, group says.

By [Joshunda Sanders](#)

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Texas Appleseed, a nonprofit public interest group, said Thursday that 167 school districts in Texas refer students to disciplinary alternative education programs at a rate that is more than twice the state's average, even when they have the option not to. Texas has 1,037 school districts.

"More than 100,000 students are referred to (alternative education programs) each year," said Ron Lewis, a Houston lawyer and the incoming Appleseed chairman. "Two-thirds of those students are referred at the discretion of school districts."

The report documents disparities among districts in how students are treated and recommends more standardized rules and increased state oversight.

"Where you go to school, and not your behavior, dictates whether you'll be referred" to an alternative education program, Lewis said.

Researchers for the group said that a history of disciplinary referrals is the single most important factor in determining whether a student will drop out of school. The alternative programs are often the last step for troubled youths before they enter the criminal justice system.

The report found that alternative education students are five times as likely to drop out as their peers in mainstream schools.

Appleseed Executive Director Rebecca Lightsey said that numerous studies have established a link between school dropouts and incarceration. Eighty percent of all Texas prison inmates are school dropouts, and one in three Texas Youth Commission inmates is a dropout, according to the Appleseed report.

When a student is suspended or removed from a classroom for violating school conduct policies, officials can refer that student to an alternative classroom. But in many cases, such placements are not required, and districts have the choice of imposing other sanctions, such as in-school or at-home suspensions.

The Austin school district was cited in the report for referring a disproportionate number of African American, Hispanic and special education students to alternative education programs.

But it was praised for beginning a program that emphasizes early, intensive intervention for some students that is meant to reduce disciplinary referrals.

The report said the Austin, Bastrop, Leander, Lockhart, Round Rock and Taylor school districts referred a disproportionately high percentage of special education students to alternative schools.

For instance, in Austin, special education students make up 12 percent of the total enrollment in the district. But special education students made up 38 percent of all alternative education referrals between 2001 and 2006.

The state average for all referrals is 2 percent of students, the report said.

Some school districts were criticized for sending prekindergarten and kindergarten students to alternative programs. State law says children younger than 6 can be referred to such programs only for taking a firearm to school.

The report listed districts that sent more than 10 prekindergarten and kindergarten students to alternative education and those that sent more than 40 first-graders.

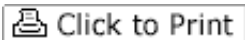
The Leander school district was the only Austin-area district listed. Between 2001 and 2006, Leander referred 19 prekindergarten and kindergarten students and 40 first-graders, according to the report.

A copy of the report is at www.texasappleseed.net/news.shtml.

joshundasanders@statesman.com; 445-3630

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