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Johnny Deas: Recognize that Texas Education is not Exemplary



Posted by [shawnpwilliams](#) on Jan 11th, 2012 and filed under [Featured](#), [Opinion](#), [Recent Posts](#). You can follow any responses to this entry through the [RSS 2.0](#). You can leave a response or trackback to this entry

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By **Johnny Deas**



Imagine you and your family are sound asleep when a fire breaks out in the kitchen. The dense, heavy smoke drifts slowly upward and into the fire alarm and then – silence. Unfortunately, your residence is equipped with faulty alarms that only emit a flashing light. The perilous, life-choking cloud of smoke continues to slowly engulf your home; though lights are flashing in every room, the risk of you and your loved ones not making it out is all too real.

This situation is unnervingly similar to the K-12 public education crisis facing this country. Your family comfortably asleep represents America. The smoke symbolizes America's approaching threat – millions of students graduating ill prepared for college, ill prepared for life. The silent alarm signifies our inability to collectively recognize the problem. The flashing light is our hope, our opportunity to save ourselves, but only if we wake up and see the light.

How did this crisis in education happen? How could we have gone to sleep so unprepared? These are difficult, perhaps impossible questions to answer. However, I'd like to suggest a few reasons why we are particularly tranquil here in Texas. First, large swaths of parents across the state are impressed with empty labels like "exemplary" and "recognized." Too few ask the simple, but relevant question – my child's school is exemplary or recognized compared to what standard?

Compared to other states, the only thing we're recognized for is being close to the bottom when it comes to education. In 2008, Texas was dead last in the nation for percentage of adults with a high school diploma (Brookings Institute). In 2011, Texas students SAT scores ranked 47th in the nation, indicating that they are among the least ready for college in the country (College Board).

Despite scores of recognized and exemplary public schools dotting the Texas landscape; our ranking in education is anything but exemplary. To be fair, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) have collaborated to replace the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) with what is being described as a more rigorous State of Texas Assessment for Academic Readiness (STAAR). Increasing rigor with STAAR is certainly a good step in the right direction.

Unfortunately, our current situation will require more than a good step; we need outstanding leaps in the right direction. Furthermore, we need to leap with a sense of urgency because Texas may have a very desolate future.

Our student population of 4.93 million students for the 2010-11 school year was 63% minority (Latino and African-American) and 59.1% economically disadvantaged (TEA). Why are these statistics relevant? They are relevant because students in these demographics (a clear majority of Texas students) have been historically the most at-risk for low academic achievement. According to Teachers College – Columbia University:

- By the end of fourth grade, African American, Latino, and poor students of all races are two years behind their wealthier, predominantly Caucasian peers in reading and math.
- By the end of high school, African American and Hispanic students' reading and mathematics skills are roughly the same as those of Caucasian students in the eighth grade
- African American students are only about half as likely (and Hispanics about one-third as likely) as Caucasian students to earn a bachelor's degree by age 29.

Academic achievement for Caucasian students is not quite as alarming, however, it is certainly no source of state pride; we are all in this together. Still, there's hope; we can make a difference both collectively and individually.

As individuals, we can educate ourselves on issues of education reform and hold the leadership at our local schools accountable. If you are a parent, you can research and understand all your options which include traditional public schools, public charter, private and magnet schools. Enroll your child in one of Dallas' high performing schools, whatever their label, and hold them accountable. At a minimum, you can volunteer or mentor a student in need.

Collectively, we can advocate for education reform by organizing parents and community leaders to write to and meet with local, state and nationally elected officials. Once we have their attention, we can press for the changes needed in education. In short, we can care enough to take action.

I care because I came from the aforementioned demographics, as a K-12 student I was economically disadvantaged and black. Some 20 years ago, it was my house that was on fire and I was the only one to make it out to safety and get a solid education. My older siblings didn't make it, and though I desperately wanted to save them, I was powerless.

Over the years, each of my siblings became victims to the circumstances of their day. The harsh smoke choked the life out of any chance they had, at the kind of opportunities my education allowed me to take for granted. Catastrophes like this continue to unfold across the nation and the situation gets progressively worse with time.

As an adult, I'm no longer powerless; I can help, and so can you. Texans, I can't be any clearer than this, our collective house is burning, the deadly smoke is still approaching, and now you've seen the flashing light. The only question is, will you take action, or roll over and go back to sleep.

Johnny Deas is the Chief Operating Officer for Uplift Education. Learn more about our high performing free public schools at uplifteducation.org.