

FISCAL NOTES

A Review of the Texas Economy from the Office of Susan Combs, Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts

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MEASURING

PUBLIC SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION DEBT



New tool helps voters compare costs

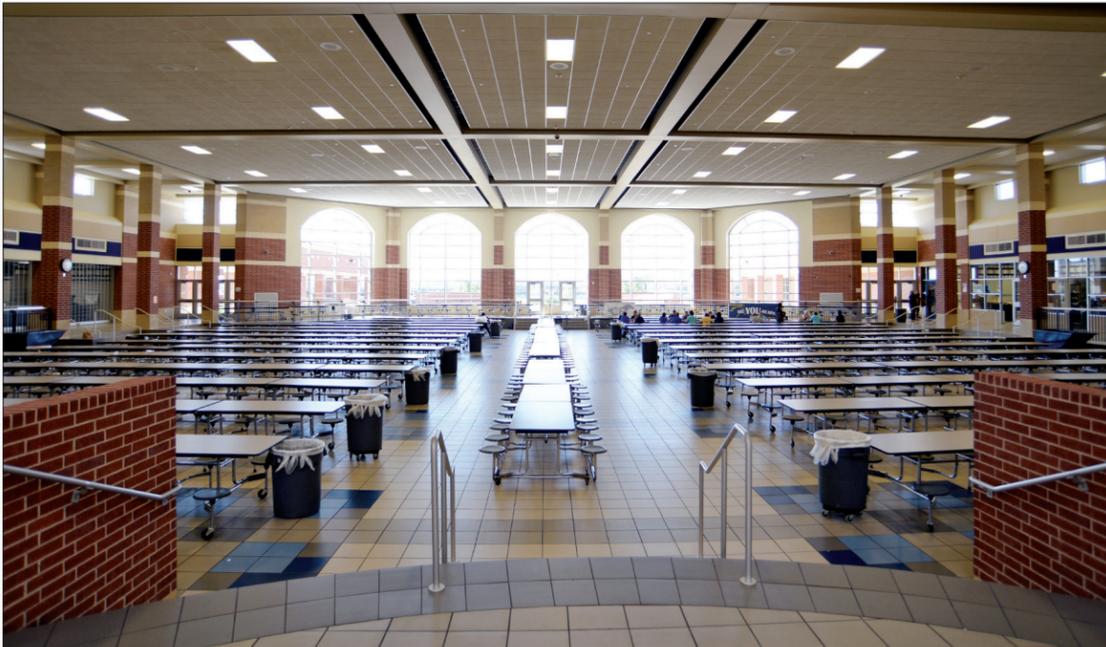
BY CORY CHANDLER

The days will become cooler, nights longer, leaves will start to turn — yep, bond season will be here before you know it.

On Nov. 4, at least 36 Texas public school districts will seek voter support for bonds to finance facility construction.



Download a copy of the [Public School Construction Costs](#) report.



Cypress Ranch High School, located in Cypress-Fairbanks ISD, opened in 2008. The district modified an existing high school's plans to comply with updated Texas Education Agency space requirements to keep costs low.

Texans in those areas can expect the typical flurry of campaign materials, making the case for millions in new bond debt to build or upgrade school campuses.

But how do they really know what would be done with the money they're being asked to authorize — and how new debt would fit into the schools' financial picture?

SCHOOL CONSTRUCTION COSTS (A LOT)

Construction costs for new Texas public school campuses built between 2007 and 2013 averaged about \$154 per square foot or \$20,769 per student, after adjustment for inflation and regional cost variations.

CONSTRUCTION COST AVERAGES BY CAMPUS TYPE

Campus Type	New Campuses Opened 2007-2013	Share of Campuses Built	Adjusted Cost Per Square Foot*	Adjusted Cost Per Student at Capacity*	Square Footage Per Student at Capacity
Pre-K	17	2%	\$163	\$17,993	111
Elementary	499	60%	\$149	\$17,461	117
Middle	157	19%	\$149	\$21,473	145
Secondary	137	16%	\$163	\$26,711	164
Mixed	24	3%	\$162	\$23,214	143
Overall	834	100%	\$154	\$20,769	135

SOURCES: Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, RS Means, data reported by school districts. NOTE: Charter school data are not included in these averages.

*Costs are adjusted for inflation and regional price differences.

A report and interactive web tool released in April allows voters to compare school construction costs — and debt — across Texas campuses.

“With access to this comprehensive database of recent construction projects across Texas, voters can see what is being spent and ask informed questions of their local school district officials,” says Gerard MacCrossan, project manager for the report.

New construction

Texas’ fast population growth has spurred a boom in school construction.

The state’s under-18 population is expanding 6.5 times faster than the U.S. average, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And school administrators have unleashed the cranes and bulldozers to keep pace with the growth.

Between 2007 and 2013, Texas saw about 870 new campuses opened by 369 school districts and charter operators.

Public school districts account for the largest share of most property tax bills in Texas. In fiscal 2013, they also held more than half of all tax-supported outstanding debt issued by local governments, about \$64.8 billion.

According to Texas Bond Review Board and Texas Education Agency data, that’s more than \$13,000 for every student in a district with debt.

In November, at least 36 Texas school districts will ask for nearly \$4 billion for renovations or new construction.



Interior of Westside Elementary School in Leander ISD, northwest of Austin.

Apples to apples

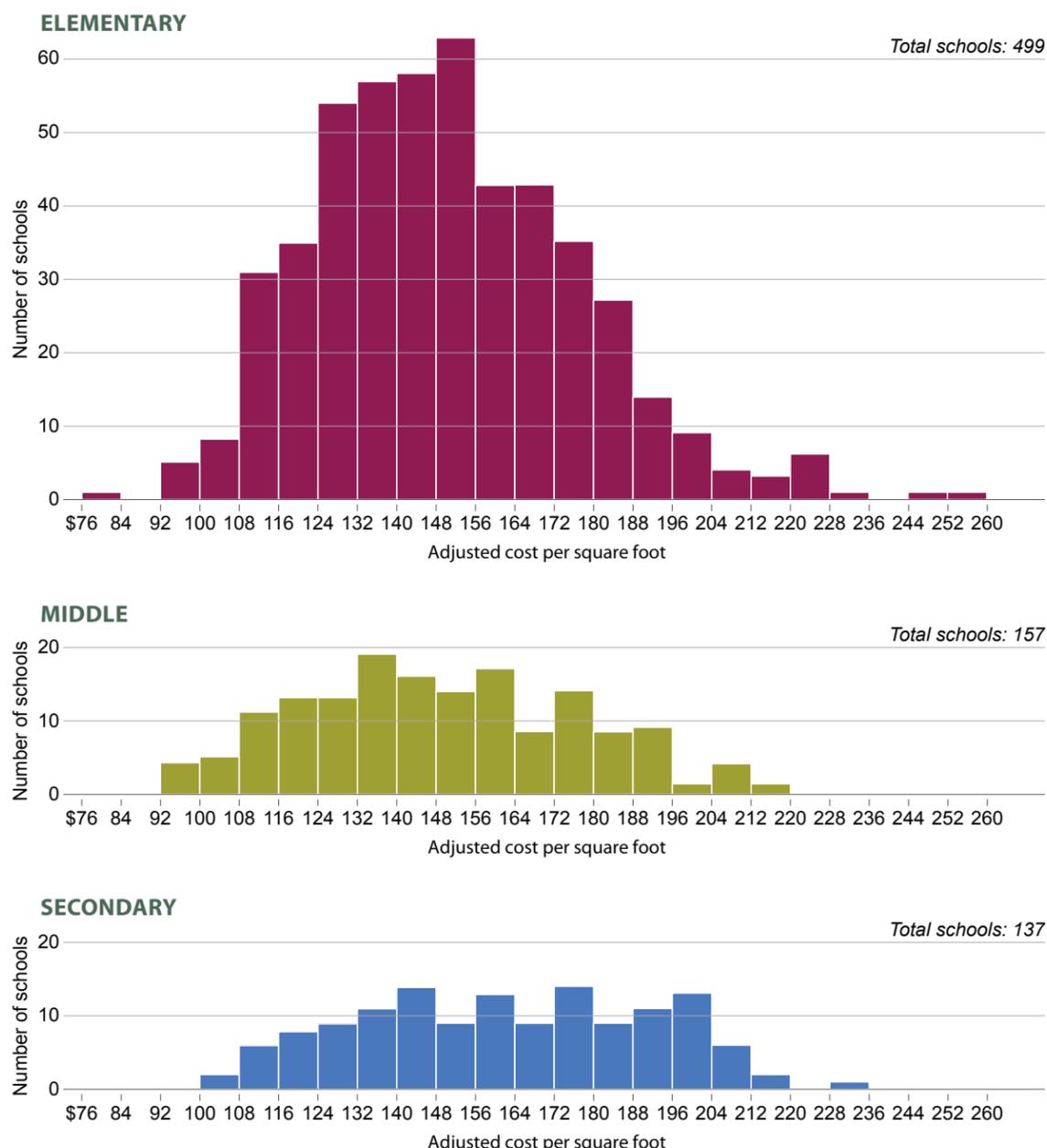
So who’s keeping an eye on all that construction?

Until recently, taxpayers had no single publicly accessible database containing all Texas public school construction data.

BUILDING COSTS VARY WIDELY

Adjusted costs for schools built in the seven-year survey period ranged from \$76 to \$260 per square foot.*

COST DIFFERENCES AMONG CAMPUS TYPES



* Excludes pre-K and mixed campuses.

SOURCES: Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, RS Means, data reported by school districts.

NOVEMBER SCHOOL BOND VOTES

Recent press reports indicate that at least 36 Texas school districts will hold November elections to seek approval of nearly \$4 billion in bond debt to finance construction and renovations.

SCHEDULED NOVEMBER BOND ELECTIONS

District	County	Amount
Aledo ISD	Tarrant, Parker	\$61,500,000
Archer City ISD	Archer	\$17,750,000
Birdville ISD*	Tarrant	\$163,200,000
Brazosport ISD	Brazoria	\$175,000,000
Bridge City ISD	Orange	\$25,000,000
Bryan ISD	Brazos, Robertson	\$132,000,000
Burnet CISD	Burnet, Llano, Williamson	\$26,750,000
Coolidge ISD**	Limestone	\$1,000,000
Corpus Christi ISD	Nueces	\$100,000,000
Corsicana ISD	Navarro, Freestone	\$49,673,624
Crane ISD	Crane	\$5,000,000
Dayton ISD	Liberty	\$87,820,000
Del Valle ISD	Travis	\$134,040,000
Duncanville ISD	Dallas	\$102,545,000
El Campo	Wharton	\$12,000,000
Fort Bend ISD*	Fort Bend	\$484,157,027
Garland ISD	Dallas	\$455,500,000
George West ISD	Live Oak, Bee	\$19,795,000
Hamshire-Fannett ISD	Jefferson	\$19,500,000
Katy ISD	Harris, Fort Bend	\$748,118,930
Kaufman ISD	Kaufman	\$57,500,000
Keller ISD	Tarrant	\$169,500,000
Lamar CISD	Fort Bend	\$240,600,000
Lexington	Lee, Williamson, Milam, Bastrop	\$7,000,000
Pasadena ISD*	Harris	\$175,550,000
Port Arthur ISD	Jefferson	\$195,000,000
Richland Springs ISD	San Saba	\$2,860,000
San Elizario ISD	El Paso	\$28,000,000
Somerville ISD	Burleson	\$12,500,000
Texarkana ISD	Bowie	\$29,900,000
Three Rivers ISD	Live Oak	\$7,145,000
Van Alstyne ISD	Collin, Grayson	\$6,900,000
Van Vleck ISD	Matagorda	\$42,715,000
Webb CISD**	Webb	\$14,300,000
Wildorado ISD	Oldham, Deaf Smith, Randall	\$13,000,000
Wylie ISD (Collin County)	Collin	\$94,200,000
TOTAL		\$3,745,904,581

* Includes funding for technology purchases as well as construction/renovation.

** Includes funding for buses as well as construction/renovation.

SOURCE: Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts

Between October 2013 and February 2014, the Comptroller's office submitted a public information request to every Texas public school district and charter operator, gathering data on schools built from 2007 through 2013.

District responses were compiled into a report on new school construction expenditures as well as a School Construction Lookup Table.

For comparative purposes, all construction costs are adjusted for inflation to 2013 dollars, and indexed to account for regional differences in materials and labor costs.

"This lookup table gives taxpayers a way to locate public school construction costs for their own community as well as compare the costs against other schools in the area or of similar size," says Sarah Tomlinson, project manager for Comptroller transparency initiatives.

Districts reported construction costs ranging from \$76 per square foot to \$260 per square foot, after adjustment for inflation and regional cost variations.

Cost variations

The report provides analysis of "outliers," projects falling significantly above or below average.

Port Arthur ISD, for instance, had some of the most costly construction projects in the survey period, due largely to the fact that the coastal district has to protect its facilities against wind and flood damage.

“We have to build with hurricanes in mind,” says Assistant Superintendent Reid Rashard.

United ISD in Laredo, by contrast, came in with the least expensive project by negotiating a favorable guaranteed price to build multiple schools using a common architectural model. Killam Elementary School was the last of six schools built from a contract signed in 2003.

“We got one price from the contractor and locked the price in,” says Ed Ramirez Jr., former chairman of UISD’s Bond Oversight Committee. “If we hadn’t locked in the price, the last couple of elementary schools would have been a lot more expensive.”

Ultimately, MacCrossan says, local school districts and taxpayers have the opportunity to build the schools that suit their communities.

“Taxpayers can see that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach to school construction in Texas,” MacCrossan says. “This report provides comparative data so that readers can learn lessons from other districts and ask the questions that will wisely guide their design and spending decisions, ensuring that students get good facilities at a price their community is willing and able to afford.”

REPORT RECOMMENDATIONS

The construction cost report offers a series of recommendations for state lawmakers.

- 1** The commissioner of education should establish standards and collect data concerning school district facilities through the Texas Student Data System or a successor data management system managed by the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

These measures should include total construction cost, cost per square foot and per student, total square footage and total student capacity.
- 2** The commissioner of education should direct each Texas school district and charter school to prepare an inventory of existing district facilities for inclusion in TEA’s data system.
- 3** When TEA’s data system is complete, the agency should report regional cost averages so that districts and their taxpayers can compare projected construction projects with other districts.
- 4** The Texas Legislature should require all public and charter school districts and campuses to provide a direct, readily accessible link to TEA’s school facilities data on their websites.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

Visit the school construction cost lookup table, which offers searchable, sortable data on costs, student capacity, square footage and more.

 www.texasparency.org/Special_Features/Reports/School_Construction/Lookup_Tool.php

School Construction Lookup Table

[Data Search Tips »](#)
(Match Any Column)

District	Campus	Opening Date	Campus Type	Square Feet	Student Capacity	Adjusted* Construction Cost	Adjusted* Cost Per Square Foot	Adjusted* Cost Per Student at Capacity	
District Name	Campus Name	See .	Campus	See	See /	See All	See All	See All	
A. W. BROWN-FELLOWSHIP LEADERSHIP ACADEMY	A.W. BROWN-FELLOWSHIP LEADERSHIP ACADEMY	7/2013	PRE-K	36,897	770	\$3,796,018	\$103	\$4,800	HOUSTON
ABBOTT ISD	ABBOTT SCHOOL	8/2008	MIXED	33,657	400	\$3,523,898	\$105	\$8,000	HOUSTON
ADVANTAGE ACADEMY	ADVANTAGE ACADEMY OF GRAND PRAIRIE	2/2012	MIXED	69,600	850	\$10,510,155	\$151	\$12,000	HOUSTON
ALBA-GOLDEN ISD	ALBA-GOLDEN HIGH SCHOOL	5/2009	MIXED	7,456	100	\$1,334,433	\$179	\$13,000	HOUSTON
ALDINE ISD	DAVIS HIGH SCHOOL	8/2012	SECONDARY	539,000	2,559	\$64,580,772	\$120	\$25,000	HOUSTON
ALDINE ISD	JONES ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	8/2008	ELEMENTARY	80,232	1,072	\$9,312,833	\$116	\$8,000	HOUSTON
ALDINE ISD	LEWIS MIDDLE SCHOOL	8/2010	MIDDLE	151,053	944	\$17,194,896	\$114	\$18,000	HOUSTON
ALDINE ISD	KUJAWA EARLY CHILDHOOD/PRE-K CENTER	8/2008	PRE-K	64,243	711	\$8,274,621	\$129	\$11,000	HOUSTON
ALDINE ISD	JONES EARLY CHILDHOOD/PRE-K CENTER	8/2008	PRE-K	64,243	707	\$8,277,913	\$129	\$11,000	HOUSTON
ALDINE ISD	RAYFORD INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL	8/2009	MIDDLE	101,930	724	\$12,611,626	\$124	\$17,000	HOUSTON
ALDINE ISD	GARCIA-LEZA EARLY CHILDHOOD/PRE-K CENTER	8/2009	PRE-K	68,242	645	\$9,492,106	\$139	\$14,000	HOUSTON
ALEDO ISD	MCCALL ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	8/2008	ELEMENTARY	89,642	744	\$13,832,766	\$154	\$18,000	HOUSTON
ALEDO ISD	DANIEL NINTH GRADE CAMPUS	8/2010	SECONDARY	159,666	1,054	\$30,177,590	\$189	\$28,000	HOUSTON
ALICE ISD	DUBOSE INTERMEDIATE SCHOOL	1/2013	MIDDLE	72,226	550	\$11,068,781	\$153	\$20,125	ALICE
ALIEF ISD	HOLMQUIST ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	8/2008	ELEMENTARY	121,423	1,040	\$12,413,304	\$102	\$11,936	HOUSTON
ALIEF MONTESSORI COMMUNITY SCHOOL	ALIEF MONTESSORI COMMUNITY SCHOOL	8/2011	ELEMENTARY	24,832	360	\$3,991,154	\$161	\$11,087	HOUSTON
ALLEN ISD	LOIS LINDSEY ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	8/2013	ELEMENTARY	119,074	950	\$13,638,765	\$115	\$14,357	MCKINNEY
ALLEN ISD	MARY EVANS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	8/2008	ELEMENTARY	119,074	950	\$13,844,607	\$116	\$14,573	ALLEN
ALLEN ISD	DAVID AND LYNDA OLSON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	8/2009	ELEMENTARY	119,074	950	\$14,444,353	\$121	\$15,205	ALLEN
ALLEN ISD	BEVERLY CHEATHAM ELEMENTARY SCHOOL	8/2010	ELEMENTARY	119,074	950	\$14,466,911	\$121	\$15,228	ALLEN

Columns to Display

- Auto:
- District ID
- Campus ID
- County
- Metro Area
- Opening Date
- Campus Type
- Construction Cost
- Square Feet
- Square Feet Per Student
- Adjusted* Cost Per Student at Capacity
- Charter School
- Street Address
- City
- Zip

Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts, Bureau of Labor Statistics, RS Means and data reported by school districts and charter operators. Sample image taken from the School Construction lookup tool.