

# FISCAL NOTES

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



## FOURTH YEAR FOR FAST

*Reports on school spending, achievement*

BY BRUCE WRIGHT

Texas' public schools are generally in the business of handing out grades, but for the last few years they've received them as well, thanks to legislation passed in 2009.

The 2009 Texas Legislature directed the Comptroller's office to study the cost-effectiveness of public education in the state, identifying school districts that use their resources wisely and in ways that "contribute to high academic achievement." In response, the agency released its first annual Financial Allocation Study for Texas (FAST) [LINK] in December 2010. The fourth edition was unveiled in December 2013.

In the newest study, 55 of Texas' charter and public school districts received five stars for educational efficiency, the highest rating available.

"We're delighted to see more and more districts learning how to get the most out of their money, producing high-quality education with wise and prudent spending," Comptroller Susan Combs says.

### FAST Features

The Comptroller's FAST reports examine school expenditures and test scores to evaluate the relationship between spending and student achievement — the results actually gained from dollars devoted to public education.

In conjunction with Texas educational experts, the agency's FAST team developed a one- to five-star rating for most of the state's school districts and charter schools — more than 1,100 in the latest study. These scores are based on both an academic progress rating and a spending index designed to create a level playing field for comparisons among Texas school districts of varying size, geography and demographics.

Five-star districts are those that rank among the top 20 percent of all Texas school districts in academic progress, while keeping their expenditures among the lowest 20 percent of comparable districts.

A related feature, the FAST Tracker Web application [LINK], allows users to create custom reports comparing districts on dozens of factors including average student-teacher ratios, average teacher salaries, graduation and dropout rates and debt and spending per student.

"It's a handy way for those who may be moving to



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*To see how school districts near you ranked in 2013, or for more information on FAST methodologies and tools, please visit <http://fastexas.org/>.*



or relocating within the state to gauge the kind of spending and educational results they can expect in their new hometowns,” Comptroller Combs says.

FAST also offers “Smart Practices,” [LINK] successful strategies school districts have used to improve their operational efficiency or student performance, as useful models for other districts.

### 2013 Results

The 55 five-star ratings awarded to districts represented the largest total of such awards since FAST began.

Urban school districts generally account for a large portion of the FAST five-stars. Harris County and Metroplex-area Dallas and Collin counties, for instance, were home to 17 of 2010’s 43 five-star districts and 19 of 2013’s 55 top districts.

But mid-sized and smaller districts outside urban areas improved their showing in 2013. About 80 percent of 2013’s five-star districts have fewer than 10,000 students, up from 73.3 percent last year. This contributed to a broader geographic distribution of top districts around the state. Thirty-two Texas counties contained a five-star district in 2013, compared to a previous high of 23 districts.

Furthermore, of 13 counties with districts appearing in the five-star ranking for the first time in 2013, five are rural and the remaining counties are “exurban” in character, part of metro areas but well away from city centers.

And charter schools continued to punch above their weight in 2013. Charter schools represented 10 percent of the 1,141 districts that received FAST ratings — and 24 percent of the five-star districts.



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**SUSAN COMBS,**  
Texas Comptroller  
of Public Accounts

## FIVE-STAR DISTRICTS

FAST identifies districts that have improved student achievement while keeping expenditures relatively low.

There are 55 five-star charter and public school districts in 2013.  
Of the 55 five-star districts, 25 held that rank last year,  
17 for three consecutive years, and 11 for four consecutive years.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Accelerated Intermediate Academy (C) **</li> <li>✓ Aledo ISD</li> <li>✓ Allen ISD ***</li> <li>✓ Avalon ISD</li> <li>✓ AW Brown-Fellowship Leadership Academy (C) ***</li> <li>✓ Brazos ISD</li> <li>✓ Celeste ISD</li> <li>✓ Como-Pickton CISD</li> <li>✓ Conroe ISD ****</li> <li>✓ Coppell ISD ***</li> <li>✓ Cypress-Fairbanks ISD ****</li> <li>✓ Dripping Springs ISD **</li> <li>✓ Falls City ISD</li> <li>✓ Fort Bend ISD</li> <li>✓ Fort Worth Academy Of Fine Arts (C)</li> <li>✓ Friendswood ISD ****</li> <li>✓ Frisco ISD **</li> <li>✓ Galena Park ISD ***</li> <li>✓ Golden Rule Charter School (C) **</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Harleton ISD ****</li> <li>✓ Harmony School Of Science (Houston) (C)</li> <li>✓ Houston Gateway Academy Inc (C) ***</li> <li>✓ Industrial ISD</li> <li>✓ Katy ISD ***</li> <li>✓ Keller ISD ****</li> <li>✓ Klein ISD</li> <li>✓ Lake Dallas ISD **</li> <li>✓ Life School (C) **</li> <li>✓ Lovejoy ISD</li> <li>✓ Melissa ISD</li> <li>✓ Midlothian ISD **</li> <li>✓ Montgomery ISD</li> <li>✓ Moulton ISD</li> <li>✓ Navarro ISD</li> <li>✓ Needville ISD **</li> <li>✓ New Braunfels ISD</li> <li>✓ North Hills Preparatory School (C) ****</li> <li>✓ Pearland ISD ****</li> <li>✓ Pilot Point ISD ***</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✓ Ripley House Charter School (C) ****</li> <li>✓ Salado ISD **</li> <li>✓ Shiner ISD **</li> <li>✓ Star Charter School (C) ****</li> <li>✓ Stephen F Austin State University Charter School (C)</li> <li>✓ Sunnyvale ISD ****</li> <li>✓ Turkey-Quitaque ISD</li> <li>✓ Vanguard Academy (C) ***</li> <li>✓ Waller ISD</li> <li>✓ Weimar ISD</li> <li>✓ White Oak ISD</li> <li>✓ Whitehouse ISD</li> <li>✓ Winnsboro ISD</li> <li>✓ Woden ISD **</li> <li>✓ Wylie ISD ****</li> <li>✓ Zoe Learning Academy (C) ***</li> </ul>
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(C) Denotes a charter operator. Like independent school districts, some charter operators run only one campus, while others run multiple campuses. All charter operators are considered school districts for the purposes of the FAST analysis.  
\*\*\*\* Five-Star District for four consecutive years. \*\*\* Five-Star District for three years. \*\* Five-Star District for two years.