

Denton County JJAEP fails to return students to traditional education, recidivism continues.

The Denton County Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program's enrollment for the 2022-23 school year has increased with students adding new arrests or referrals to their present sentences.

From the 2021-2022 school year, the JJAEP had an attendance number of 80 students at its peak. Out of those 80 students, 14 were arrested during the school year and subsequently removed from the program, as they were in violation of their probation or order of release. The following year, 2022-2023, both attendance and recidivism numbers starkly increased. In April of that school year, 156 students were in attendance. From 14 students in the last year to 33 students in the 22-23 school year, both the number of arrests and number of total students approximately doubled.

“Naturally, numbers of everything will increase with the amount of enrollment, but for it to be more than doubled shows that the program is not as effective as needed,” UNT Criminal Justice Graduate student Michelle Coker said. “The program is not able to fit each student's needs.”

The failure to accommodate students' needs may be a reason for the unsuccessful test improvement scores. In both the 2021-2022 and 2022-2023 school years, just over half (55%) of students showed improvement in math scores. The rates of improvement drop off year to year in reading scores, with 44% improving in 2021-2022, decreasing to only 33% in the following year. In our interview, Coker alluded to the possibility of a decrease in funding and resources to the students being the cause of the slowed improvement. “In both JJAEP and DAEP, a

one-size-fits-all mentality doesn't work," Coker said. "Whether it is through more funding or social work, these programs need to be able to tailor to those needs."

The total attendance increase from the prior school year does not appear to be a rising trend. The number of JJAEP students over the last five years has not been predictive, as the numbers only increase with the corresponding number of disciplinary actions and mandated orders from the court.

Students' rate of completion is high in the JJAEP, with both school years hovering around 95% completion for eligible middle and high school students. This number does not mean the students are returning to traditional education. The expectation of the county government is for students to complete their program and return to their home campus, but it is unclear if students are opting to return or leave education altogether. [Texas Administrative Code](#) requires an exit transition plan, but there is no requirement that the transition is to return to traditional education.

Lewisville ISD and Little Elm ISD are opting to remove mandated students with felony drug related charges from JJAEP after the passing of House Bill 114 earlier this year. These students will now be placed in DAEP or Disciplinary Alternative Education Program, a facility to temporarily remove students from typical instructional settings. For the 2023-2024 school year, no other ISD will follow suit. In the 2022-2023, 197 students were placed in JJAEP for felony drug charges, and this reason seems to be the most common for admittance into the Juvenile programs, as it was also the highest counted reason the previous year.

Looking into the school year of 2023-2024, according to JJAEP documents, the program expects to start this school year with 42 students. The current numbers were not made available for this report. Denton County JJAEP Supervisor Tiffany Sherman could not be reached for a statement.

