

## Story

The Denton County Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Program produces low test scores and is a recipe for lackluster social skills among students.

The JJAEP was designed to be a place for students who have been removed from the traditional learning setting to continue their studies in a safe and encouraging environment. With its military-style approach to rehabilitation and discipline, one would think that there is a positive turnaround rate for students who re-enter the traditional setting.

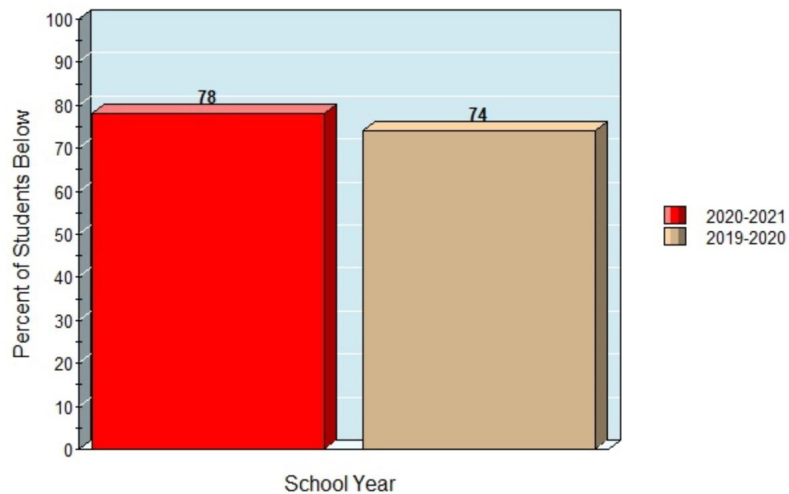
“I saw a lot of students leave traditional education without being fully aware of what alternative school meant,” former Lewisville ISD ESL teacher Sohil Sikdar said. “It broke my heart, there wasn’t a lot of intervention I could have had in the short time I had with these kids.”

With the low student enrollment at the alternative program, one would assume that testing would be high because of the isolation. However, there is the theory that isolation combined with the hyper-focus on discipline and testing is more harmful than helpful. Sikdar now teaches in Spain and gives a completely different outlook on the perception of American education.

“Education was obviously important there, but there was an emphasis on being an individual and spending time learning yourself there,” Sikdar said. “I don’t know [...] American education sometimes feels like it wants bottom lines and test scores and not much else.”

While a population of students enrolled at JJAEP is mandated by the state, there are questions to be raised about its efficacy. Test scores are low and do not seem to be increasing. The testing performance report from the [Texas Juvenile Justice Department](#) 2020-2021 school year shows that there was a four percent increase in students testing below grade level from the previous year. Not only is their efficacy in question, but faith in the use of resources among public schools may come under scrutiny soon. Schools that are ill-prepared for students with behavioral issues are the schools with lower budgets and a lack of counseling resources. What they do with their resources can depend on what they are already equipped for. Behavioral difficulties may be low on that list – opting for them to send more students to alternative education programs – further hindering them behind their peers.

### Students Testing Below Grade Level



“I feel like the people who do get put in alternative school are just the ones they don’t want to deal with,” recent Marcus High School graduate Preston Barnhill said. “Kids that smoke too much pot, might be getting bad test scores or like fighting or something.”

Barnhill and Marcus senior Zaid Alqasem share similar sentiments towards what students they think enter into programs like JJAEP.

“I don’t think it’s necessarily the bad kids, but just like the ones the principals might think are too difficult to motivate,” Alqasem said.

There is a brewing political movement, one that is growing popular among Texas parents. The school voucher program would assign monetary value to each student, giving parents a choice as to what education program their children enroll in. Advocates for this program believe it is a choice to put tax dollars into programs best suited for their children, be that public school, private school, or any other type of alternative education. This burgeoning movement indicates faith in public schooling may be fading. It could be a difficult thing for public schools and their families to face, as Lewisville ISD Superintendent Dr. Lori Rapp speaks about in a podcast interview in 2022.

“Vouchers as we know it, would not provide transportation for families to wherever they may want to spend the voucher,” Dr. Rapp said. “Of course, the question then becomes ‘What does the accountability look like for parents that take those dollars in the form of a voucher if they choose to homeschool?’”

Dr. Rapp goes on to discuss the additional costs private schools may require for enrollment, barricading families of lower income. This barrier would also draw taxpayer dollars away from public schools, crushing potentially already low budgets to support students who have no choice but public education. The further implication would infer that students enrolled in alternative programs, such as JJAEP, would be at risk of total cuts to the budget, where the mandated students would be cast completely out of luck. Pulling money away from these programs because of faithless sentiments may harm students who are already in situations where they are disadvantaged.