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HARRIS COUNTY  
**SCHOOL RE-ENTRY  
WORKGROUP**

January 27, 2025

Mr. Mike Miles  
Superintendent of Schools  
Houston Independent School District  
4400 West 18th Street  
Houston, Texas 77092

**Re: Community Concerns for the Reentry of At-Risk Youth into Houston Independent School District Schools**

Dear Superintendent Miles:

The Harris County School Reentry Workgroup (The Workgroup) is a consortium of community-based organizations that seek to remove barriers to school reentry for youth transitioning from disciplinary and juvenile justice programs. The purpose of our letter is to bring to your attention a concern we have regarding the difficulty at-risk youth in Harris County experience when enrolling in Houston ISD schools, especially following release from a juvenile justice facility. For purposes of this letter, we have adopted Houston ISD’s definition of “at-risk” to mean “students at risk for school failure due to non-academic indicators”<sup>1</sup> including juvenile justice involvement. Through this communication, we hope to bring awareness to the problems youth and families encounter as they attempt to return to school and recommend action steps the district should take to resolve these issues. Properly supporting the reintegration of at-risk youth into the district will improve school safety and positive education outcomes, including increased graduation rates.

## **The School Reentry Problem**

At-risk youth in Houston ISD are chronically disenfranchised when they attempt to reenter their community schools. Campus registrars and administrators routinely put up artificial barriers to prevent youth from enrolling due to the stigma attached to their juvenile justice status.<sup>2</sup> If, and when, justice-involved youth are finally able to enroll in school, the work they completed while attending school in the juvenile facility often does not transfer with them,<sup>3</sup> which leads to youth not receiving credit for their work once they reenter community schools. This problem is compounded by the fact that justice-involved youth are already chronically behind in school.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, when students are prevented from enrolling in school, they miss instruction, which causes them to fall further behind. For students with disabilities, enrollment delays and insufficient transition planning denies them the supports and services they need in order to receive the free appropriate public education they are entitled to under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.<sup>5</sup> The profound level of discouragement justice-involved youth experience when they return to school, and the toll these unnecessary barriers take on their already fragile mental health, cannot be overstated. All of these barriers significantly increase the likelihood that youth will dropout and cycle back through the juvenile justice system.<sup>6</sup>

As youth advocates, we are keenly aware of the increase in real and perceived threats to school safety that have plagued school districts across the nation since the start of this school year. While those threats must be taken very seriously, we believe Houston ISD can agree that facilitating the successful return of students from alternative education programs, including juvenile justice facilities, to their home campuses presents a unique opportunity to enhance school safety. Research shows that, when students “feel connected to school, experience relative academic success, and develop positive relationships with teachers and social groups in school, they are less likely to recidivate or engage in delinquent behavior following their reentry.”<sup>7</sup> It is our firm belief that when school reentry is done well, everyone is safer. With that perspective in mind, we ask that you consider our concerns and recommendations.

## **Reasons Schools Illegitimately Deny Students Enrollment**

Campuses tend to use the same reasons to deny enrollment, including:

- Claims that the student is too old to enroll in middle school (student is usually 15 or 16 years old), or high school (often 17-year-olds enrolling in the 9<sup>th</sup> grade);<sup>8</sup>
- Requests for documents that Houston ISD’s own enrollment website and board policy state a parent has up to 30 days to provide *after* enrollment;<sup>9</sup>
- Advising the youth that they have to enroll at the district’s disciplinary alternative education program (DAEP) first instead of enrolling them at their home campus and then arranging for the student to be transferred to the DAEP in violation of district policy;<sup>10</sup>
- Requests to verify residency by doing a home inspection, or requiring homeless families to produce leases or other documents they cannot, and are not required to produce under federal law;<sup>11</sup>
- Claims that the student was an attendance or behavior problem when they last attended, followed by a recommendation to get their GED;

- Claims that it is too late in the school year to enroll (used in April and May);<sup>12</sup>
- Claims that the student cannot enroll because they have been charged with an offense, or are on probation;<sup>13</sup> and
- Claims that the student cannot be enrolled because the school is STAAR testing.<sup>14</sup>

## **Houston ISD Served as a Model for School Reentry During the 2022 – 2023 School Year**

In 2021, this Workgroup sent an almost identical advocacy letter to your predecessor, Superintendent Millard House. In response, he and former Deputy Superintendent, Rick Cruz, investigated our concerns and determined that the problems we reported were meritorious. In response, Houston ISD administration took the following steps to remedy the issues we had identified:

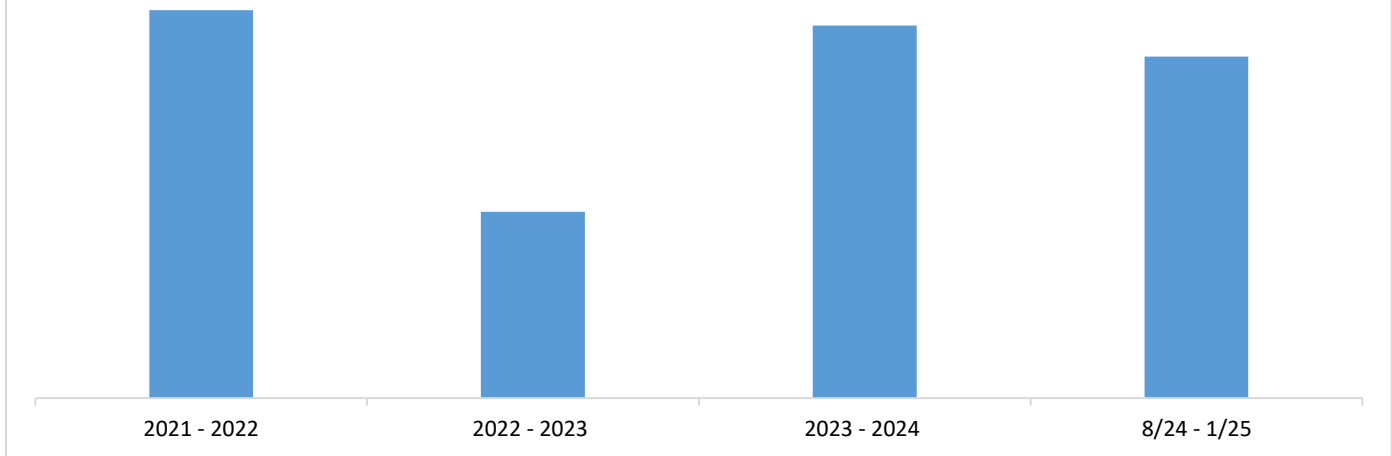
1. Revised all written policies on the district’s website to eliminate contradictory language;
2. Trained all registrars to ensure timely enrollment of all students;
3. Developed a new enrollment department designed to assist students and families with the enrollment process; and
4. Reorganized roles within the Social and Emotional Learning Department to create a Reintegration Team that focused solely on ensuring youth returning to the district from alternative education programs were provided the individualized transition planning required by law.

For the past nine years, Disability Rights Texas (DRTx) has operated an education advocacy program that serves Harris County justice-involved youth to ensure they receive the education services they need and are entitled to in an effort to improve educational outcomes. During this time, DRTx has tracked how frequently probation department staff have referred youth to the program for help with enrollment problems. Following the changes Houston ISD administration implemented during the 2022 – 2023 school year in response to our previous letter, DRTx’s juvenile justice education advocacy program saw a **58% decrease** in the number of referrals from HCJPD staff for enrollment denials. Our Workgroup celebrated the victory achieved by working collaboratively with Houston ISD to properly address the needs of reentry youth!

Sadly, after the elimination of the Houston ISD Reintegration Team at the start of the 2023 – 2024 school year, the DRTx juvenile justice education advocacy program saw a dramatic spike in referrals from probation department staff for denials of enrollment in the district. In fact, the number of referrals doubled from 2022 – 2023 school year, thus returning to levels seen in the years prior to the changes made in response to our previous letter. Furthermore, we have already received nearly the same number of referrals for denials of enrollment in Houston ISD during the first half of the current school year as we received during the entirety of the 2023 – 2024 school year.

The chart below provides a visual representation of the trend in enrollment problems in Houston ISD over the last three school years and the first half of this school year. These numbers provide concrete evidence that the practices Houston ISD had in place during the 2022 – 2023 school year were effectively addressing the enrollment and reentry needs of at-risk youth in the district and that the removal of the Reintegration Team has harmed students who have returned to the district over the past year and a half.

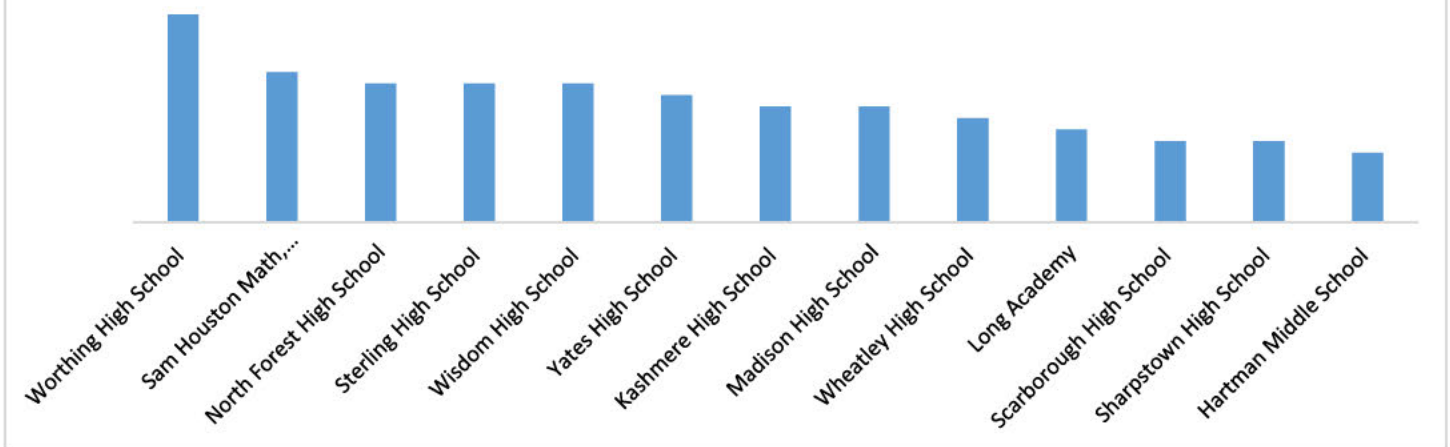
### Referrals to the DRTx juvenile justice education advocacy program for assistance with a denial of enrollment in Houston ISD by school year



Furthermore, the elimination of the Reintegration Team resulted in the discontinuation of appropriate transition plan development for at-risk youth in accordance with Texas Education Code §37.023 and board policy FOCA(LEGAL). This legal provision requires school districts to develop a transition plan within five school days of a student's *release* from a disciplinary placement or juvenile facility. The plan should describe the best educational placement for the student along with the supports and services needed to help the student succeed as they return to their community school. The Reintegration Team served as the lead for educating and training school administrators and counselors on how to develop appropriate and effective transition plans for students. As a result of their efforts, the DRTx juvenile justice education advocacy program saw a decline in enrollment problems, as noted above, and increased satisfaction among students and families that they were being properly supported throughout the transition process. Students have felt the absence of the Reintegration Team over the last year and a half due to not having appropriate, or in some cases, any transition plans, causing students to struggle with school reentry far more than they should.

Below is another chart showing the Houston ISD campuses for which the DRTx juvenile justice education advocacy program has received the most referrals for delayed or denied enrollment over the course of the last nine years,<sup>15</sup> all of which are majority African-American and/or Hispanic.<sup>16</sup> It is important to note that these numbers are an underestimation of the frequency of this problem since the issue is chronically underreported.

## Houston ISD campuses with the most denials of enrollment between January 2016 - January 2025



### Practices Conflict with Houston ISD's Mission Statement

The data our Workgroup has collected and shared highlights the conflict between the district's practices and stated mission, which includes the beliefs that:

- "Equity is...the lens through which all policy decisions are made.
- There should be no achievement gap among socio-economic groups or children of ethnic diversity.
- The district must meet the needs of the whole child, providing wraparound services and social and emotional supports.
- Schools should be safe, vibrant, joyful spaces where students are guaranteed access to a challenging and deep educational experience."<sup>17</sup>

There are important questions district administration must ask themselves relative to the issues highlighted in this letter. How do campus-level practices that prevent and discourage primarily black and brown students from enrolling in school align with the district's stated mission to ensure decisions are made through an equity lens? How will the district close the achievement gap for ethnically diverse students who attend the campuses that deny enrollment the most if those students cannot enroll in school and do not receive the support needed once they are enrolled? How can the district support the needs of the whole child when the Reintegration Team has been eliminated and there is no process in place to ensure the district is in compliance with state law and district policy requiring campuses to engage in a reentry planning process? Lastly, how can students returning to their community schools from disciplinary and juvenile justice programs be "guaranteed access to a challenging and deep educational experience" when they are prevented from reentering their schools?

### Sources of the Problem

Based on our regular interactions with school district personnel in efforts to resolve enrollment issues, we believe there are five practices that lead to denials of enrollment across so many campuses in Houston ISD.

1. **Decentralization of the school district.** When we speak with district-level staff about enrollment issues they tend to immediately understand the problem, agree that the student should be enrolled straightaway, and take action to correct the situation. Sometimes campus-level staff quickly comply with directives from district-level directors to enroll students, but in many cases, they do not. It is evident to us, as outsiders, that there is a lack of continuity across the district regarding how schools implement board policy and comply with district-level directives.
2. **Lack of appropriate training and accountability for campus registrars and administrators.** Many campus level staff we interact with are simply not well versed in state and local admissions policies. Even when the policies are shared with them, campus-level staff sometimes still fail to move forward with enrollment. At that point, district-level intervention is usually requested. If the campus fails to comply with a directive from the district to enroll the student, there is very little recourse and no specific procedures for assisting students with making up the instruction missed while they were not enrolled in school.
3. **Elimination of the Reintegration Team.** The Reintegration Team was embedded in the Social and Emotional Learning Department, but once that program was widely eliminated prior to the start of the 2023 – 2024 school year, there were no district level staff with knowledge or expertise regarding the requirements for conducting appropriate transition planning in accordance with TEC §37.023 and Board Policy FOCA(LEGAL). Consequently, Workgroup members who work directly with reentry youth have had difficulty obtaining copies of transition plans because they are either not being developed, or are insufficient to meet the student’s reentry needs. The shame of it is that Houston ISD’s Reintegration Team was a model for best practices around school reentry. With the elimination of this team, the Workgroup has been forced to look to other school districts to reference as a model.
4. **Lack of support from the Enrollment Department.** During the 2022 – 2023 school year, the DRTx juvenile justice education advocacy program received positive reports from juvenile probation department staff and other community members that contacting the Enrollment Department for assistance with enrollment problems was effective. During this school year and the last, however, reports have indicated that attempts to resolve enrollment issues by reaching out to the Enrollment Department have been met with unanswered phone calls and emails. We believe that the increase in requests for assistance that many of the School Reentry Workgroup member organizations experience are caused by the lack of responsiveness from this department.
5. **Implicit biases lead to the criminalization of youthful behaviors.** There is an unfortunate tendency of some school staff to view youth returning to schools from alternative education programs, including juvenile facilities, as criminals because their “implicit biases... distort the assessment of a youth’s delinquency, dangerousness, and their risk of reoffending.”<sup>18</sup> The reality is that these students are children who engage in impulsive decision-making due to their underdeveloped brains. It is sometimes difficult, however, for staff members who have responsibility for facilitating the transition of these students back into their community schools to view them through that lens, which leads to the enrollment hurdles we so frequently encounter in Houston ISD.

## Recommendations for Resolving School Reentry Issues in Houston ISD

Given that all youth are part of our community and are entitled to equal access to education, we offer the following recommendations to address the problems raised in this letter:

1. **Engage in training.** The Region 4 Education Service Center held a two-day professional development training in June 2024 to provide guidance to educators “on best practices to aid in student success and reduce recidivism during [their] transition” back to school. <sup>19</sup> This training encourages school districts to use restorative circles to help them meet the requirements of TEC §37.023, the exact practice Houston ISD used during the 2022 – 2023 school year with great success. We recommend you seek out this training from Region 4 for all district and campus-level staff who have responsibility for ensuring compliance with the school reentry law. We also recommend the district engage in implicit bias training to help campus registrars and administrators overcome their unconscious preconceptions that lead to exclusionary enrollment and reentry practices.
2. **Reinstate the Reintegration Team.** The district should reinstate the Reintegration Team so transition meetings are consistently and timely held as required by Texas Education Code §37.023 and Board Policy FOCA(Legal), using the Transition Meeting Template created by the School Reentry Workgroup (see attached). To ensure consistent and effective implementation across campuses, the district should develop and provide training to all district level administrators, school counselors, and registrars on the proper application of this law and school board policy. The School Reentry Workgroup could incorporate training on transition meetings into a larger training on state and local policies and procedures pertaining to student admission and enrollment provided above.
3. **Review Enrollment Department operations.** The district should review the operations of the Enrollment Department. If this Department were once again available to assist with enrollment issues, we would see more youth enrolled in a timely manner, which would increase positive educational outcomes including graduation rates for this at-risk population.
4. **Implement improved data collection and tracking.** As stated in this letter, the true frequency with which denials of enrollment occur is unknown. The data DRTx has provided is based solely on requests for assistance with enrollment issues from juvenile probation department staff. We believe students struggle to successfully enroll far more often than we have been able to report. We, therefore, encourage Houston ISD to establish a system that allows it to track when a student attempts, but does not complete enrollment. We also encourage the district to track how many students who reenter following placement in a juvenile facility have a personalized transition plan developed for them in accordance with TEC §37.023 and Board Policy FOCA(Local). This data should be maintained in a central, easily accessible format so the district can quickly and easily determine whether rights violations are occurring and take swift action to remedy the problems.

We appreciate your attention to this matter and would be happy to discuss our concerns and recommendations with you at your earliest convenience. Please contact Disability Rights Texas Supervising Attorney, Sarah Beebe, to schedule a meeting.

Sincerely,

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<sup>1</sup> Houston ISD Student Assistance Program website, <https://www.houstonisd.org/studentassistance>.

<sup>2</sup> Juvenile Law Center, Education Law Center-PA, Drexel University, and the Southern Poverty Law Center, *Credit Overdue: How States Can Mitigate Academic Credit Transfer Problems for Youth in the Juvenile Justice System*, pg. 15 (2020).

<sup>3</sup> *Id.*, pg. 4.

<sup>4</sup> Southern Education Foundation, JUST LEARNING: THE IMPERATIVE TO TRANSFORM JUVENILE JUSTICE SYSTEMS INTO EFFECTIVE EDUCATIONAL SYSTEMS—A STUDY OF JUVENILE JUSTICE SCHOOLS IN THE SOUTH AND THE NATION 18 (2014) (internal citations omitted), <http://www.southerneducation.org/getattachment/cf39e156-5992-4050-bd03-fb34cc5bf7e3/Just-Learning.aspx>.

<sup>5</sup> 34 C.F.R. §§ 300.1 and 300.17.

<sup>6</sup> Juvenile Law Center, et al., What the “Every Student Succeeds Act” Means for Youth in and Returning from the Juvenile Justice System – Factsheet (January 2016), <https://www.in.gov/doi/files/essaji-factsheet-final-webinar-version-jan262016.pdf>.

<sup>7</sup> Julia Behen Kubek, Carly Tindall-Biggins, Kelsie Reed, Lauren E. Carr, Pamela A. Fenning, *A Systemic Literature Review of School Reentry Practices Among Youth Impacted by Juvenile Justice*, *Children and Youth Services Review* 110 (2020) 104773, pg. 1.

<sup>8</sup> T.E.C. §25.001. Any person between the ages of 5 and 21 is eligible for enrollment in a Texas public school district.

<sup>9</sup> TEC §25.002(a)(2). Previous school district has 10 business days to provide records to new district; family/guardian has 30 days to provide school records. *See also*, Houston ISD policy stating: “No student may be denied enrollment solely because of failure to meet the documentation requirements,” <https://www.houstonisd.org/enroll>.

<sup>10</sup> Houston ISD 2023 – 2024 Disciplinary Alternative Education Program placement procedures.

<sup>11</sup> 42 U.S.C. §11432(g)(3)(C)(i). Schools must enroll homeless youth immediately, “even if the child or youth is unable to produce records normally required for enrollment, such as previous academic records, medical records, proof of residency, or other documentation.”

<sup>12</sup> There is no statute or board policy that limits enrollment to a particular time of year.

<sup>13</sup> TEC §37.010(f) “if the student meets the requirements for admission into the public schools..., a district may not refuse to admit the student.”

<sup>14</sup> There is nothing in statute or board policy prohibiting enrollment during STAAR testing.

<sup>15</sup> Disability Rights Texas is only able to share the number of enrollment problems that are reported to their program through requests for assistance from Harris County Juvenile Probation Department (HCJPD) staff. Based on the many anecdotal stories from HCJPD staff who resolve these problems on their own without referring the issue to DRTx’s program for assistance, and from other community stakeholders, many of whom are signed on to this letter, we know that students are denied enrollment at a far higher rate than the numbers we are able to provide reflect.

<sup>16</sup> Houston ISD Research and Accountability, RESEARCH CAMPUS DEMOGRAPHIC REPORT, 23 – 24,

<HTTPS://PUBLIC.TABLEAU.COM/APP/PROFILE/HISD.RESEARCH.AND.ACCOUNTABILITY/VIZ/CAMPUSDEMOGRAPHICREPORT2223/HOME>.

<sup>17</sup> 2023 – 2024 Board Goals, pg. 1, <https://www.houstonisd.org//cms/lib2/TX01001591/Centricity/Domain/7908/Board-Goals-01262021-ENG.pdf>.

<sup>18</sup> Dr. Rita Cameron Wedding, *Implicit Bias: More Than Just a Few Bad Apples*, Juvenile Justice Information Exchange, June 15, 2016, <https://jjie.org/2016/06/15/implicit-bias-more-than-just-a-few-bad-apples/>

<sup>19</sup> Region 4 Education Service Center, *Circle Up: Restorative Practices to Support Students’ Transition from Alternative Education Program to Their Home Campus*, June 10 - 11, 2024, [https://www.escweb.net/tx\\_esc\\_04/catalog/session.aspx?session\\_id=1769046](https://www.escweb.net/tx_esc_04/catalog/session.aspx?session_id=1769046)