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# TEXAS RESEARCH LEAGUE

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# ANALYSIS

## STUDENT RETENTION: REDEFINING SUCCESS

Picture this scenario: With the League's help, the Texas business and education communities have joined forces and the dropout problem has been eliminated. Every kid in the state will finish high school. Texas education and the state's economic future has been saved, right?

### WRONG!

A state with a 100% graduation rate that includes students who can barely read and write will never succeed in a competitive global economy. Keeping kids in school is a prerequisite to building a trained and skilled workforce, but that alone is not sufficient to the task. In the future, employers will need graduates who have more than basic skills.

Regardless of the measure used, Texas students do not compare favorably in terms of achievement with students from other states, even less so with students from other countries. Without change, the future looks even worse; demographic shifts and differences in achievement will result in a paucity of high-achieving students.

The dropout problem stands as one very visible manifestation of youth in crisis in America. The changing school-age population with its special problems is not succeeding in a school environment that reflects yesterday's social and economic structure. Solving the dropout problem is less than half the battle. The real battle is the struggle for quality schools, and this battle has just begun.

### CAN THE SCHOOLS FIX THE PROBLEM?

As presently structured, schools are ill-equipped to meet the needs of students. Disadvantaged students do not perform well academically and face a host of social and economic problems unlike those of

the past. Where chewing gum and running in the halls were once cited as unacceptable behavior, teachers today must deal with issues unthinkable 40, or even 20 years ago (Table 1). Dropout prevention strategies must be designed and administered with this in mind.

An example of social problems for which the schools are presently ill-prepared is teenage pregnancy. Consider the following:

- In 1983 (the most recent year for which comparable data is available), 110 of every 1,000 American girls between the age of 15 and 19 got pregnant.
- In the Netherlands the rate was 15 of every 1,000 girls.
- Texas has the third highest rate in the nation for births to girls between the age of 15 and 19.
- Texas has the highest birth rate for girls aged 14 and under.
- Texas does not mandate sex education for students.

**Table 1**  
**Student Behavior Problems**  
**Through Time**

1940s	1980s
Talking	Drug Abuse
Chewing Gum	Alcohol Abuse
Making Noise	Pregnancy
Running in Halls	Suicide
Out of Place in Line	Rape
Improper Clothing	Robbery
Not Using	Assault
Wastebasket	Arson
Messy Locker	Bombings
Holding Hands	

Source: *The Institute for Educational Leadership*

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Another example of the complexity of social and economic factors facing the schools is pre-school programs. Texas will soon pilot pre-kindergarten programs for disadvantaged three-year-olds, but without adequate nutrition or health care, a child's development may be compromised long before entering pre-school. Good prenatal and neonatal care are important for a child's development, but until very recently Texas provided such care for only a small percentage of poor mothers. In 1986, Texas ranked 49th out of the 50 states in the percentage of mothers receiving early prenatal care. The state also had the second-highest percentage of babies born to mothers receiving no, or only late (third trimester), care.

**FAMILY STRUCTURES HAVE CHANGED.** One of the major changes in American society in recent years is the transformation of the family structure. Today, nearly half of all mothers of children under age 6 are in the labor force; in 1970 less than 30% were working. For children between the ages of 6 and 17, 63% of their mothers are employed. Quality child care has thus become an important issue for working parents.

Another change is the rapid rise in the rate of out-of-wedlock births, along with high rates of marital separation and divorce. In 1986, 23% of all children were born out-of-wedlock; in 1950 the rate was 4%. As a consequence, the number of mother-only families has risen from 10% of all families in 1967 to 21% in 1984, including more than half of all black families.

It is estimated that over one-half of all children born today will live in a mother-only family at some point before attaining age 18. The poverty rate of these mother-only families is more than four times the rate of poverty in two-parent families.

Compounding this problem is the failure of the nation's court-administered child support system. Only half of white fathers and one quarter of black fathers pay any child support; less than half the mothers get the full amount and 26% receive nothing at all.

The increase in mother-only and two-worker families means that many children do not have adult supervision after school (the "latchkey" child). Children who are home alone for 11 or more hours a week on a regular basis are twice as likely to develop substance abuse problems as are those who are not latchkey children according to a report by the National Institute on Drug Abuse. Children from two-parent families were just as likely as those from single-parent families to develop a drug problem. The child's socioeconomic status, sex, race, academic performance or involvement in church, sports, or other extracurricular activities made no difference. The important factor was the length of time the child is

left alone; the risk of substance abuse increased the greater the amount of time spent without supervision.

**OTHER SOCIOLOGICAL FACTORS.** By the end of this century, no single racial or ethnic group will be in the majority in Texas public schools; indeed, there will be a "minorities' majority." By the year 2025, Hispanics are projected to become the single largest racial/ethnic group in Texas schools. They are also the group that has the highest dropout rate at every level of education. Given this fact, the implications of this change are enormous.

More than 60% of Hispanic students have parents who are high school dropouts. A recent study of Hispanic children found two basic family conditions associated with finishing school: the presence of a father in the home and having a parent with a high school education. Students in the study indicated that their parents expect them to finish high school and get good jobs. Yet, two-thirds of these students lacked the basic conditions listed above.

A number of researchers (most prominently James Coleman) have posited that the quality of adult and peer relationships has a powerful influence on how a child develops, educationally and otherwise. Children who perform well tend to have a large amount of "social capital" as a result of family, community, and peer relationships that support academic achievement and responsible social development. Those with less social capital do not perform as well either in school or socially.

Another line of research (exemplified by John Ogbu of the University of California at Berkeley) has centered on those minority groups that have performed poorly in today's school environment. Ogbu has found that black students often have family, peer, or community relationships that do not support, and may even inhibit, high academic achievement. This may occur in both middle-class as well as poor black families. Three causative factors were identified: discrimination within educational institutions, discrimination in the job market, and negative coping mechanisms developed in order to retain a sense of identity while functioning in the larger society.

In interviews with black students, both successful and underachieving, all of the students said that academic success was viewed negatively by their peers. Successful students run the risk of being labeled "brainiacs," a highly pejorative term. The researchers found that achievement in school is often equated by minorities with learning to "act white." This attitude developed during many generations when white Americans held that minorities were incapable of academic success. This denied minorities the opportunity to succeed academically, and they were not rewarded academically when they did succeed.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR BUSINESS

Increasingly, business has come to view education as an investment in youth and in the nation's future. Recognizing the value of education, business involvement in the school system has increased dramatically. At last count, there are more than 140,000 school-business partnerships. Yet educational progress has been slow or non-existent.

One of the model school-business partnerships is the Boston Compact. This partnership, which promises preferential hiring and college scholarships to disadvantaged youth, is being duplicated across the country. However, during the first five years of the compact the dropout rate in Boston grew and standardized test scores remained low. The *Boston Globe* observed that there was "little disagreement that while business more than exceeded its compact goals, the schools fell short of theirs." Observers suggested that businesses are "simply providing life support systems for schools that should heal themselves..."

While it is possible that the compact may have prevented an even higher dropout rate, it appears to have been successful only as a youth employment program. The "carrot" of jobs and scholarships is meaningless to a disadvantaged youth who is woefully deficient in basic skills long before he or she reaches high school. Methods to strengthen basic skills must be employed in addition to the incentives; both motivation and ability are required to succeed in school and at work.

Business frustration with the Boston Compact resulted in its renegotiation. In talks with school officials, the business community refused to provide more incentives unless the school district examined a number of reforms, including school-based management (dispersing central authority), school choice, and greater teacher autonomy. In addition, accountability measures have been added to make sure that the schools improve their performance.

Impatient with school district reforms in Chicago, a number of businesses joined together with concerned educators and community leaders to create The Corporate/Community Schools of America (C/CSA). This group establishes and operates business-sponsored elementary schools based upon educational research, successful teaching methods, and "market-driven" innovations. The C/CSA opened its first school in 1988 to serve 150 pre-primary-level children from ages two through eight. Funded by corporate donations, the corporate community school is "a private school in fact but a public school in purpose."

## THE NEED FOR EDUCATIONAL ACCOUNTABILITY

Business experience with school reform efforts across the nation highlight the need for accountability in education. How can one tell if a dropout program, a teaching strategy, or a restructured school is successful? Student performance on the Texas Educational Assessment of Minimal Skills (TEAMS) examination measures only basic skill proficiency. This is important, but we must also be concerned about developing higher-achieving students, tomorrow's scientists and engineers.

Many dropout prevention and recovery programs claim great success, but do not back it up with any kind of evaluation. This does not necessarily mean that the program is ineffective; there may be factors, such as lack of resources, which make documenting results difficult, but without assessment the claims remain unsubstantiated.

Another problem is that programs may fail to target those most at-risk. The Boston Compact is one example of this situation, which has been called "creaming," or targeting students who are more likely to succeed than the most at-risk population. It is not difficult to understand why creaming occurs. Raising funds for dropout programs is not an easy task, especially when a program shows less than exemplary success. Programs which target the "hardcore" at-risk students are likely to show lower success rates than those that engage in creaming. It is necessary, then, for business and educators to take this factor into consideration in determining whether or not to fund a given program or approach.

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# STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT IN TEXAS

The League has received a grant from the Exxon Education Foundation to conduct a study of student achievement in Texas. This study will identify differences in student achievement and isolate the factors contributing to these differences. Texas student performance on the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) will be examined, along with descriptive information collected by the College Board, which administers the SAT. The descriptive information identifies "background" factors in student achievement (economic status, race, grade point averages, etc.).

Some of the questions that the study seeks to answer are:

- What are the characteristics of students who succeed in school?
- How does achievement differ based on ethnicity?
- To the extent that it differs, what are the characteristics of the students who perform well relative to those who do not? In what areas are black and Hispanic students doing well?
- How does achievement differ within ethnic/racial groups? For example, how do test scores differ for Hispanics for whom English is a second language and those for whom English was the first language learned? For those with parents who graduated from college versus those whose parents did not graduate from high school?
- What kind of coursework are Texas students taking to prepare themselves for college? Does this differ by sex, race, or ethnicity?

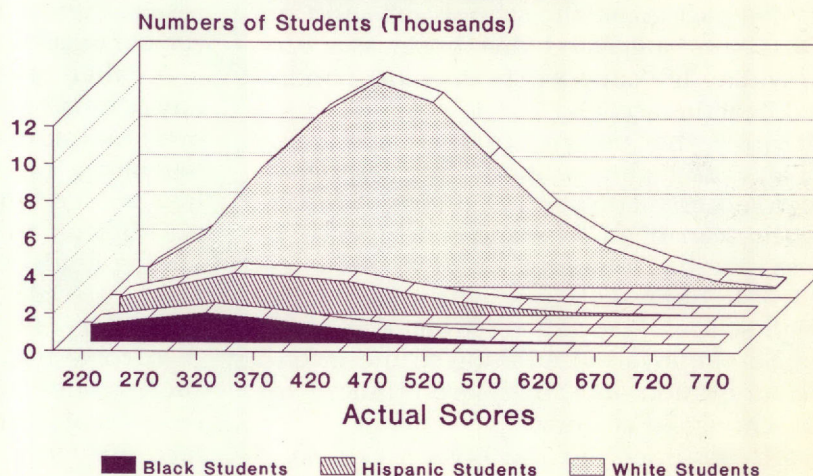
The information obtained from the SAT data can help to answer some important questions concerning the impact of changing demographics on student achievement in Texas. Based on current patterns, what will be the impact of demographic changes on student performance, particularly

for high-achieving students? How will these projected achievement patterns match future labor requirements in business, industry, and the professions?

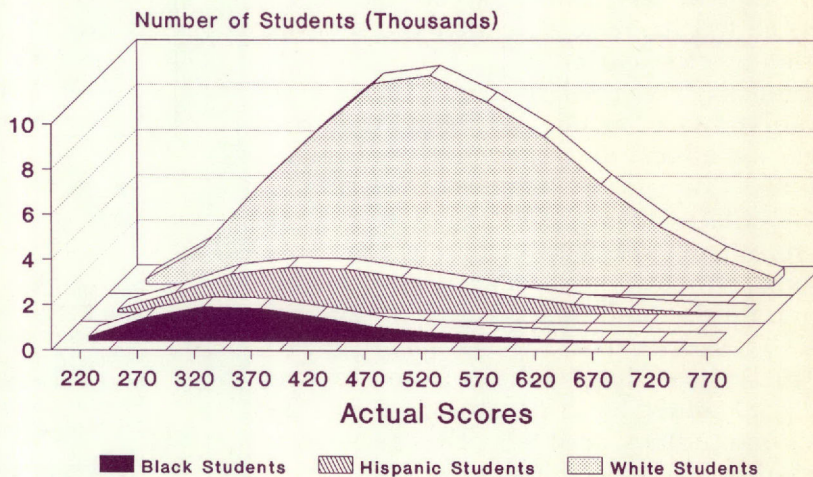
## 1988 SAT RESULTS ILLUSTRATE THE PROBLEM

Access to higher education requires a high school diploma, or its equivalent. Given the low graduation rates for blacks and Hispanics in Texas, this fact

**Figure 1**  
**1988 SAT Verbal Scores**  
**Ethnic Breakdowns**



Source: The College Board



Source: The College Board

alone restricts the number of minority students eligible for college. For those who do graduate, far fewer take the SAT than do their white counterparts. While more than half of white high school graduates take the SAT, only 30% of black and 27% of Hispanic graduates take this exam.

Differences in graduation rates and in overall student performance reflect differences in educational opportunities. There is no question that all students, whatever their background, can learn. However, disadvantaged students may lack the family, social, and economic support that is critical for educational success. In Texas, this is reflected in both lower graduation rates and achievement test scores, especially for black and Hispanic students.

Disparities in achievement between white students and black and Hispanic students are large on both the verbal and math portions of the SAT (Figure 1). Far fewer black or Hispanic students receive high scores on this examination. Given the projected need for more highly skilled graduates in the future, this has grave implications for Texas' economic well-being.

Figure 2 illustrates the barrier created by low scores on both sections of the SAT (a breakdown of students by total score is not available without examining the data tapes). The maximum score on both the verbal and math portions of the SAT is 800, for a combined possible total of 1600.

The University of Texas at Austin requires a combined score of 1100 for students who do not graduate in the top one-quarter of their high school class. Using a score of 550 as a cut-off on both portions (for a combined score of 1100), 14.4% of white students, but only 2.5% of black and 5.4% of Hispanic students achieved this score or higher on the verbal portion of the exam. On the math por-

tion, 28% of white students scored 550 or higher, while only 6.5% of black and 13.4% of Hispanic students received similar scores.

More alarming than the percentages are the absolute numbers that they represent. On the verbal portion, only 171 black and 588 Hispanic students scored 550 or above, while 7,907 white students scored at this level. If a higher score, say 650, is used to define the "high-achieving" students, only 29 black and 98 Hispanic students would fit that definition. In contrast, 1,559 white students would qualify as high-achievers.

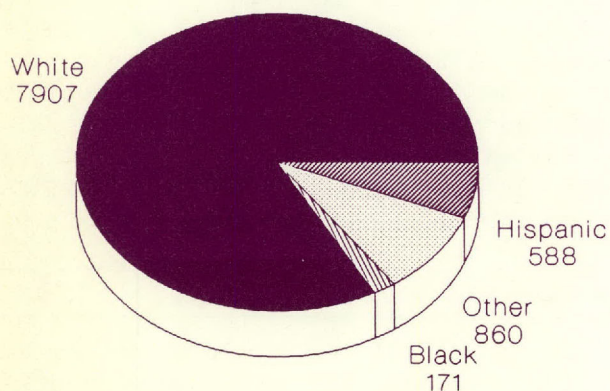
**PARENTAL EDUCATION AND STUDENT SCORES.** As would be expected, students whose parents had higher educational levels scored higher on the SAT. Table 2 lists the highest educational level attained by parents of SAT takers in 1988. Only 1% of white SAT participants had parents without high school diplomas; nearly a quarter of Mexican American students had parents without high school diplomas. Almost two-thirds of white SAT takers had parents

**Table 2**  
**1988 SAT Takers**  
**Highest Level of Parent's Education**

Racial/ Ethnic Group	No High School	High School Diploma	Associate degree or higher
White	1%	34%	65%
Black	6	50	44
Mex. American	24	45	31

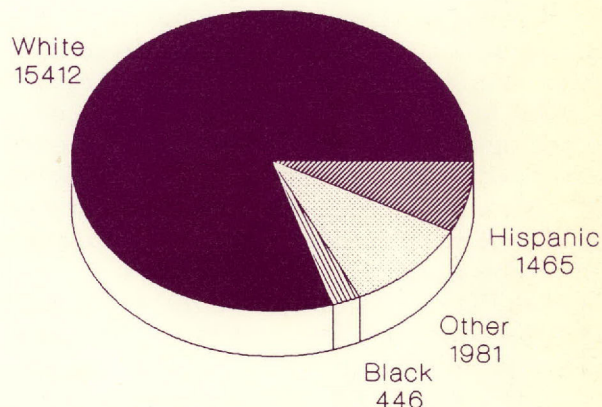
(Source: College Board)

**SAT Verbal Scores Over 550**  
**Ethnic Breakdowns**



**Figure 2**

**SAT Math Scores Over 550**  
**Ethnic Breakdowns**



Source: The College Board

with an advanced degree (associate degree or higher), while more than half of all black and Hispanic students had parents with only a high school diploma or less.

**IMPLICATIONS FOR THE FUTURE.** Very soon, white students will be a minority group in Texas' public schools. Unless achievement patterns change, the pool of high-achieving students will dwindle. At the same time, changes in the economy are projected to increase the demand for highly-skilled workers. The gap between supply and demand for these workers

could place Texas at a comparative disadvantage, both with other states and with other nations.

Despite the fact that minority youth perform at lower levels on the SAT, proportionally more of these youth have indicated a desire to major in engineering and the hard sciences. If SAT scores are predictors of college performance, many of these students will not succeed in their chosen field. Fulfilling these students aspirations is more than a lofty goal, it is a necessary condition for economic growth in the next century.

## STUDENT RETENTION PROJECT

The League's student retention project has been active throughout 1989. Progress towards the project's goals is discussed below.

### Project Progress Report

Activity	Completed	In Progress
Background Research	X	
Develop Evaluation Criteria	X	
Hold Retention Conferences		X
School District Evaluations		X
Public/Private Program Evaluations		X
Develop Business Survey	X	
Analyze Business Survey		X

they achieve the highest degree of competency. The Coalition will be an unrelenting force to pursue and achieve educational excellence in our legislature, in our communities, in our school districts, and in our classrooms."

The League was instrumental in bringing together the key players in the coalition and in raising awareness of the depth of the crisis in public education. League President Gary Wood is a member of the task force that created the coalition and continues to actively participate in its development.

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### STUDENT RETENTION CONFERENCE

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In June, the League co-sponsored a conference entitled "Getting Down to Basics in Dropout Prevention." The conference was a collaborative effort by the League, the Texas Center for Educational Research, and the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory. The meeting brought together representatives of the business and education communities to discuss evaluation of dropout prevention programs and public/private partnerships in Texas schools.

Perhaps the most valuable feature of the conference was the interaction between educators and business persons; two groups whose paths rarely cross. Many participants commented on the value of establishing better communication between business and education. Because Austin is already the site of so many educational conferences, project staff will hold regional meetings during 1990 in order to broaden participation.

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### SCHOOL DISTRICT EVALUATIONS

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The project will evaluate 18 school districts in Texas and their dropout prevention strategies. This will be a collaborative effort with the LBJ School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin. League staff and LBJ students will interview the designated at-risk coordinator in each district to

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### THE TEXAS EDUCATION SUMMIT CONFERENCE

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The League has played a vital role in bringing together representatives of both business and education to discuss problems of Texas public education. In February, the League sponsored the Texas Education Summit, patterned after a national education summit held by *Fortune* magazine in 1988. The Texas meeting was one of the first state summits held in response to *Fortune's* gathering.

The Texas conference played a pivotal role in energizing the state's business community to press for major changes in public education in Texas. It was funded separately from the student retention project through the generous support of the Southwestern Bell Foundation and the Exxon Company, U.S.A. A second meeting was convened in August, and as a result the **Texas Business and Education Coalition** was created.

The coalition's *A Proposal for an Internationally Competitive Workforce for Texas by the Year 2000*, states that its mission:

"... is to achieve a dramatic increase in student learning in Texas public schools. It is vital both to keep students in school through graduation and to assure that

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## **The League has played a vital role in bringing together representatives of both business and education to discuss problems of Texas public education.**

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learn about the district's needs and its dropout prevention plan.

The districts included in the project were chosen to be representative of the state. The sample includes rich and poor, urban, suburban, and rural school districts. The sample includes poor districts with a high minority enrollment as well as wealthy suburban districts with a relatively homogenous student population. This diversity will allow project staff to assess the effects of district size, wealth, racial/ethnic mixture, and regional factors on local dropout prevention activities.

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### **ASSESSING BUSINESS EFFORTS IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS**

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Perhaps the most important facet of the project is the evaluation of business involvement in public schools, especially dropout prevention efforts with business support. The business community has demonstrated that it is eager and willing to support programs which keep children in school and boost their academic performance. However, there is little hard research to document the effectiveness of many, if not most, dropout reduction strategies.

Businesses have been generous to public schools, donating employee time, equipment, and money to a wide variety of dropout prevention programs. However, this relationship is often very one-sided: businesses give aid and form partnerships to aid the schools, but the schools do little more than say thank you. For their part, the business community has not demanded greater accountability from the schools. Good business practice dictates that investments be made wisely to yield the greatest return. But when it comes to education, there is frequently little attention to the bottom line -- does the program work?

The League's project seeks to answer that question. Project staff will evaluate business-sponsored programs and partnerships to determine which strategies produce results. This will provide a guide to effective programs for businesses seeking to improve public education in their community. With this guide, businesses can leverage their resources to get the best return on their dollar.

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### **SURVEY OF TEXAS BUSINESS**

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In late November, the student retention project will mail surveys to all companies supporting the

League. This survey has been designed to determine:

- the opinion of company management as to the quality of Texas public education, the level of education that the company requires for employment, and educational requirements for the company in the future;
- what qualities or experience the company looks for in its entry-level, non-professional employees today and expects to need in the future;
- what kinds of job skills, including basic reading, writing, and math are currently lacking;
- the cost to the company for remedial education of its employees;
- business attitudes concerning school reform, including specific reform strategies; and
- the company's involvement in local schools today, and what the company would be willing to provide in the future.

In addition to gauging business perceptions of public education, the survey will assess the job preparedness of Texas youth and forecast future educational requirements. Moreover, the survey will document the level of company involvement in schools today and their willingness to do more for the schools in the future. In this manner the survey can do more than simply describe educational problems. It can also document the Texas business community's deep commitment to quality education for all children.

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### **COORDINATED APPROACH**

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The League's evaluation of a sample of school districts has the endorsement of the Texas Association of School Boards and the Texas Association of School Administrators, and letters from them were sent to the board president and superintendent in each district. This support is an example of the coordinated student retention effort which the League's project seeks to build.

In addition to selected districts, League staff members are evaluating examples of private-sector programs throughout Texas. This is perhaps the most important portion of the project; with this knowledge the League can inform its members of worthwhile programs and strategies. If education is an investment, business support should go to those efforts that yield a high return on that investment.

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## **The League was instrumental in bringing together the key players in the coalition and in raising awareness of the depth of the crisis in public education.**

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## Human Services Audit Presented

The latest in a series of public/private audits of state agencies, sponsored by the governor's office, concluded in October and the audit team presented its findings to Commissioner Ron Lindsey and his staff at the Texas Department of Human Services.

Governor Clements asked the team, made up of five volunteers from state agencies and five volunteers from private industry, to look at DHS' support functions and recommend improvements.

The department's new board had already begun making changes in the 14,000 employee department that had addressed some of the audit teams major concerns.

A special thanks goes to League members for supporting the public-private audit concept and to Paul Roth--Southwestern Bell, Bill George--Texas Instruments, Bernard Pieper--Brown & Root, Bartell Zachry--H.B. Zachry Company, and Tom Shockley--Corpus Christi Power & Light for providing volunteers to this team.

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