

Thursday, September 24, 2015



School Bus Seat Belt Issue Returns

The recent fatal Houston school bus crash continues to create concern about safety on buses. We reported yesterday about [a state senator's request for the Senate Education Committee to study what more the state can do about school bus safety](#). You can bet that the long standing push for more seat belts will be in the forefront of proposed remedies. Although the state has never come up with the funds to equip school buses with safety belts, the idea is already popping up again in scattered news stories. A recent [Longview News Journal article](#), for example, discussed the issue with several East Texas school transportation directors. And it's been the topic of [Joe Smith's commentary in Texas ISD](#) twice this week already. He includes references to several high profile school bus accidents where seat belts would have resulted in more victims. Indeed, Smith and transportation officials quoted in the press agree that belts on buses cause more problems than they solve. School leaders—who no doubt will be asked for their opinion on the subject over the months ahead—[will want to be well prepared](#) to answer related questions.

Spotlight on Region 10 Schools

[Trinity Environmental Academy](#) opened its doors for the first time last month to students interested in a comprehensive, environmentally focused education utilizing the Great Trinity Forest as a learning laboratory. The charter school is located on the campus of Paul Quinn College in southern Dallas where officials say the partnership between a public elementary school and private college is a first in Texas. The academy, sponsored by non-profit environmental literacy advocate [Sustainable Education Solutions](#), leases space in existing buildings on the college campus. [It is currently open to students in kindergarten, first and sixth grades, and its first graduating class will be in 2022](#). Through environmentally focused curriculum and project-based learning, Trinity Environmental Academy aims to become a U.S. Department of Education Green Ribbon Schools Designee by the 2019-2020 school year.

Ninety-nine percent of Richardson ISD's Class of 2015 took the ACT, compared with 43% in Texas and 59% in the United States. In 2013, RISD was the first district in Texas to offer the ACT college entrance exam free-of-charge to all junior students at their home campuses during the school day. Last year, a number of districts in Texas followed suit, introducing the college entrance process to a much higher percentage of students than otherwise traditionally participate. "When all students are able take the ACT for college entry at their own campus where they are comfortable, and without the barrier of cost, they increase their chances of attending college," said RISD Superintendent Kay Waggoner. "While we know that statistically, ACT performance usually drops as participation increases, we're pleased that our composite scores this year remained steady as more students took the exam." [More here.](#)

Frisco ISD trustees recently [recognized Liberty High School senior Sunjoli Aggarwal for earning the highest possible composite score on the ACT college admission exam.](#) Aggarwal joins others in FISD who have obtained this achievement in recent years, a rare and significant accomplishment. Nationally, while the actual number of students earning a composite score of 36 varies from year to year, on average, less than one-tenth of 1% of students who take the ACT earns the top score. Among test takers in the high school graduating class of 2014, only 1,407 of nearly 1.85 million students across the country earned a composite score of 36.

Scanning the News

Illinois school districts have a new ally in Gov. Bruce Rauner [as they try to eliminate state mandates that they say drive up costs and sometimes force them to lay off some staff while adding others.](#) The Republican governor is pushing for mandate relief as part of a larger proposal to freeze property taxes, curb the influence of public-worker unions and overhaul the state's school-funding formula. Rauner claims the relief could save districts statewide more than \$200 million annually, helping to offset the loss of funding from a property tax freeze and bringing the kind of "structural reform" he says Illinois needs. Illinois imposes well over 100 mandates on school districts, covering everything from classroom content to parent-teacher conferences and school holidays. Districts that cannot or don't want to follow a particular mandate may apply for a limited number of waivers via a lengthy process.

The North Carolina Senate is considering legislation that would divert some funding for traditional public schools to charter schools. The entities share resources mostly based on enrollment, but some public school funding is kept separate from the money that's split with charters. [Under the new Senate bill, public school districts would have to share additional federal funding, gifts and grants, sales tax revenues and other funding.](#) Also, supplemental school district taxes would have to be shared with charters – even if a child who resides in a district is attending a charter outside its boundaries. The North Carolina Association of School Administrators strongly opposes the measure, noting that a number of funding allocations could be affected including federal funding for nutrition services and technology.

The novelty of a traditional snow day may be coming to an end in Georgia's Gwinnett County Public Schools. [The state's largest school district is considering using a digital curriculum during prolonged periods of inclement weather to avoid multiple snow days out of class.](#) Superintendent J. Alvin Wilbanks recently announced that the school district is studying use of its eCLASS digital curriculum component to continue instruction as usual when schools are forced to close. While there are some families without access to the Internet, Wilbanks said officials [will be working on alternatives for them.](#) Although the district builds three snow days into the annual calendar, it has been forced to add 30 minutes to school days to make up for additional shutdowns in the past.

Items of Interest

The Texas State University System is partnering with the not-for-profit Modern States Education Alliance to help students earn up to one full year of college credit tuition-free. Beginning in fall 2016, the program will offer more than 30 top quality online college courses at no cost, along with free online texts and materials. The courses are from edX, the joint venture of Harvard University and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the nation's leading developer of Massively Open Online Courses (MOOCs). Students in the program will be able to select [freshman-level courses from the Modern States catalog](#) that apply toward degrees at TSUS's eight component institutions. They can then earn credit towards a degree either by earning a three or higher on an AP exam or by passing a CLEP test. While high school students have long been able to earn some college credit through the tests, "Freshman Year for Free" will make this option available to non-traditional students who didn't have access to college-credit courses in high school or who are entering college as working adults. [Read more here.](#)

Physical education and athletic programs in schools don't just promote student fitness. All that moving around may also offer a significant mental health benefit, according to a new study that found [regular exercise may help buffer bullied teens against harmful thoughts](#). Researchers from the University of Vermont found that [four or more days of physical activity per week reduced suicide attempts in bullied teens by as much as 23 percent](#). The findings were published in the Journal of the American Academy of Child and Adolescent Psychiatry. The new study is hardly the first to confirm a science-backed mental health benefit of exercise, but it is the first to link exercise with a reduction in suicidal thoughts among those who are picked on in school. Data suggests [28 percent of students in grades nine through 12 are bullied](#), according to the CDC.

A Texas municipal judge has a unique way of dealing with teens who show up in his court the second time with a traffic citation. [Judge Kevin Madison orders them to put a big, bright yellow sticker on the back bumper of their car that reads, "Report My Unsafe Driving."](#) Underneath is a phone number and the words "Lakeway Municipal Court." If the offender goes six months without being the object of a call, the ticket is wiped off the record. "They're not happy usually," said Judge Madison. "It's going on the back of their car. It's like the Scarlet letter when you drive over to Lake Travis High School." He came up with the idea after hearing about a group of nurses in Dallas who had bumper stickers made for their own children that said "How is my teen's driving?"

Looking Ahead

Because many dangers threaten to corrupt school information or impede access to it, districts have to take steps to back up data routinely, on location and off-site. Most back up student, human resource and finance records and other essential administrative data every night. Typically, they take a tiered approach, moving data between high-cost backup services that offer more immediate access and lower-cost solutions for archival storage. But new devices and lower-priced cloud offerings mean districts no longer have to trade access for cost. School leaders contemplating a review of their current data backup system will want to take a look at District Administration Magazine's recent in-depth article on the topic. [Check it out here.](#)

Resource Bank

"It ain't over till it's over." It's one of many Yogi-isms that have become part of our everyday language. Indeed, when Yogi Berra passed away this week, the country lost much more than a legendary baseball player/manager who was an 18-time All-Star and won 10 of the 14 World Series he appeared in. Berra's [contributions to MLB history](#) are incalculable, but his legacy might be even better remembered for what he contributed to American language. Yogi-isms are countless, but in Berra's honor *USA Today Sports* compiled a list of favorites. Their ["The 50 Greatest Yogi Berra Quotes"](#) is today's [Resource Bank](#) item.

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Region 10 Education Service Center ... 400 E. Spring Valley Rd., Richardson, Texas 75081-5101 | 972.348.1700

Location #2 ... 904 Abrams Rd, Richardson, TX 75081 | 972-348-1750

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