



La Frontera:

Student achievement in Texas border and nonborder districts



The region along the U.S.–Mexico border, commonly known as La Frontera, is home to about 12 million people (United States–Mexico Border Health Commission, 2007). The region has changed dramatically over the past 50 years with commercial and population growth accelerated by the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA, 1994). In spite of this growth, much of the population along the border remains poor and unemployment is three to four times higher than the rest of the country. This environment creates a unique set of challenges for educators.

To assist policymakers in understanding these challenges, Regional Educational Laboratory Southwest (REL Southwest) sponsored a study to develop a data-driven profile of the current education environment in the La Frontera area of Texas.

The report, aimed at improving student achievement in the border area, sought to answer three questions:

How do Texas border and nonborder districts differ in location and size, student demographics, teacher data and community economics?

Where do significant differences exist between border and nonborder districts and what does the recent literature say about the relationship between these variables and student achievement?

How does student performance on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) differ between border and nonborder districts?

District Location and Size

Of the 1,033 school districts in Texas, 63 districts (6.1 percent) lie in the La Frontera region, the area within 20 miles of the U.S.–Mexico border. These districts enrolled 13 percent of the state's 4.5 million students in the 2005/06 school year. Of the remaining 970 districts, 62 (6.0 percent) were located in a margin region that lies 21 to 100 miles from the border, with 908 districts (87.9 percent) located more than 100 miles from the border (i.e., the nonborder region).

These differences are important in light of recent findings on the relationships among district size, community socioeconomic status, and student achievement. Research suggests that smaller districts tend to have higher achieving students (Driscoll, Halcoussis, & Svorney, 2003), and students in areas with low socioeconomic status benefit most from small schools in small districts (Berliner, 2006).

Overall, the La Frontera region is more urban than other parts of Texas. Applying the National Center for Education Statistics locale codes to districts in the border region, about half (47.6 percent) are located in a city or suburb (i.e., urban fringe) compared to almost a quarter (23.7 percent) of nonborder districts, and 8 percent of districts in the margin region. Districts in the border region also tend to have more schools and have higher overall enrollments than those in the nonborder region.

Student Demographics

As a group, Texas border districts enroll a much higher percentage of Hispanic students, Limited English proficiency students, and bilingual students than do districts in other parts of the state. Almost 94 percent of students in districts in border region are Hispanic, compared with 69 percent in the margin districts and 38 percent in districts in the nonborder region. On average, 29 percent of the students enrolled in the border region in 2005/06 were designated as limited English proficient, compared to the statewide average of only 7.3 percent. Similarly, one in four students in the border region are enrolled in bilingual programs, while the statewide proportion is 7 percent.

District-level attendance rates were generally uniform across the three regions in 2004/05 (the most recent year for which data are available), with reported averages around 96 percent for most groups of students. Districts in the border region did, however, have a slightly higher dropout rate (0.84 percent) than districts in the margin (0.57 percent) and nonborder (0.44 percent) regions.

Teacher Data

Although many of the teacher-data variables did not differ significantly by region, two differences stand out. First, the border region districts tend to employ higher proportions of Hispanic teachers, and teachers serving bilingual students. White teachers constitute 86 percent of the teaching staff in Texas, but the border region generally employ a higher percentage (65.7 percent) of Hispanic teachers. This finding may be a positive sign in light of research showing that a shared ethnic and cultural background between teachers and students tends to have a positive influence on student achievement (Hanushek, Kain, O'Brien, & Rivkin, 2005).

Second, districts in the border region tend to employ slightly higher proportions of less experienced teachers. Research suggests that teachers with fewer year of experience, particularly those with two years or less, tend to be less effective (e.g., Goldhaber & Anthony, 2003). Considering that districts in the border region tend to have higher percentages of teachers with less experience, the teaching force in La Frontera as a group may be slightly less effective.

Community Economic Data

There are significant and substantive differences in the community economics of the border and nonborder regions of Texas. For instance, a lower proportion of adults in border districts have graduated from high school or attended college than in nonborder districts. Family income levels also tend to be significantly lower in border districts. In 2000, the average median income in the border region was \$27,712 compared to \$34,123 in the margin region and \$42,985 in the nonborder region. Border districts also have higher poverty levels. Almost 40 percent of children ages 5–17 in La Frontera districts live below the federal poverty line compared to 19.5 percent statewide.

Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills Test Results

At each of the grade levels examined (grades 3, 5, 8, and 11), students in the border region have lower pass rates on the reading or English language arts and mathematics sections of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) than do students in other regions. For example, the differences on the math section range from 6.8 percentage points at grade 3 to 10.7 percentage points at grade 8. This discrepancy is not surprising considering research suggests that larger districts with lower family socioeconomic status levels and less experienced teachers, all characteristics of La Frontera districts, tend to have lower student achievement.

Key Questions for Policymakers

This research provides policymakers with current demographic and student achievement information for districts in the border region in Texas. Policymakers can use this data to begin consider a number of key questions.

- Are the characteristics of districts in La Frontera unique enough to warrant specific policy initiatives aimed at the challenges they face in improving student achievement?
- Are there programs and policies that can be developed to attract and retain experienced teachers to the La Frontera region?
- Are there cost effective ways to gain the benefits of smaller organizational size in light of the relationships among district size, community socioeconomic status, and student achievement?

To access the comprehensive report, *La Frontera: Student achievement in Texas Border and Nonborder Districts*, visit:
<http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/projects/project.asp?id=75>

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- The full report, *La Frontera: Student achievement in Texas border and nonborder districts*, is available on the National Center for Education Evaluation and Regional Assistance website <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs>.