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Group to Take Texas Reform Tools Nationwide

By David J. Hoff

Washington

A Texas group is preparing to offer its recipe for improving schools on the national stage.

Just for the Kids Inc. is launching an effort to review test scores, identify schools that do not meet expectations, and show troubled schools practices that work elsewhere. The organization is offering its services to states for free, and is working with eight of them already.

"Now is the time to come forward with a model that shows what we ought to do with test data," Tom Luce, the founder of the Austin-based nonprofit group and the chairman of the new National Center for Educational Accountability, said at a news conference here last week.

The center "will take the lead in the country to make sure accountability data are used as a tool to improve academic performance," he added.

The strategy of linking data analysis and interventions in schools with so-called best practices is something state policymakers have been looking for to help them make sense of the growing amount of data from their testing systems, according to Ted Sanders, the president of the Education Commission of the States, a Denver-based clearinghouse on education policy and a partner in the innovative project.

"The most significant question on their minds today is how do we help failing schools improve," Mr. Sanders said. "This methodology is extremely powerful."



National Scope

The launch comes as the body of state student-achievement data is poised to expand.

Under proposals in Congress to reauthorize the main federal K-12 law, states would be required to assess students in reading and mathematics each year in grades 3 through 8 and to measure their progress toward state goals.

The federal plan is modeled after the Texas school improvement program that President Bush inherited when he became the governor there 1995.

That same year, Just for the Kids created a database to analyze the data delivered by the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills—or TAAS. By analyzing schools' yearly test scores, the Austin group identified successful schools and sought to understand their ingredients for success.

Working with local educators, Just for the Kids officials also intervened in struggling schools to help them adopt practices working in schools like their own.

Just for the Kids also has been active in distributing schools' test scores to help parents evaluate their children's schools.

Just for the Kids founder Tom Luce is flanked by Larry R. Faulkner, the president of the University of Texas at Austin, left, and Ted Sanders, the president of Education Commission of the States.
—Allison Shelley/*Education Week*

This month, *Texas Monthly* magazine published the group's ranking of more than 5,000 Texas public schools. The fine-print chart lists each school's reading and math scores, its rank on a five-star ranking system, and its gap in performance between it and other schools with the same or greater percentages of financially disadvantaged students.

Duplicating a Formula

The formula can work in other states, even though few of them conduct annual testing in as many grades as Texas does, according to Mr. Luce. The influential lawyer has been active in Texas school policy since he worked on a school improvement commission headed by H. Ross Perot, the Texas businessman who later ran for president.

For the past year, the National Center for Educational Accountability has been working with seven other states to set up systems similar to the one Just for the Kids created in Texas.

The new states and Texas enroll about 20 percent of the nation's public school students. "That is a significant start," Mr. Luce said. The states currently consulting with the new center in the effort are Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Ohio, Minnesota, Tennessee, and Washington.

The national center will begin offering free services to states and hopes to raise public and private funds to underwrite the effort.

It has received \$1.3 million from the U.S. Department of Education, as well as a series of grants from private foundations, Mr. Luce said. The University of Texas at Austin, a third partner in the effort, is offering the national center office space and other administrative support.

The 15 members of its board of directors include former Secretary of Education Richard W. Riley, former North Carolina Gov. James B. Hunt Jr., and Larry R. Faulkner, the president of the University of Texas at Austin.