

A CHRONICLE INVESTIGATION

# Denied:

## How Texas keeps tens of thousands of children out of special education

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Roanin Walker waits for some sprinklers to shower him during a hot day on the front yard of his family's Kingwood home in July 2016.

During the first week of school at Shadow Forest Elementary, a frail kindergartner named Roanin Walker had a meltdown at recess. Overwhelmed by the shrieking and giggling, he hid by the swings and then tried to escape the playground, hitting a classmate and biting a teacher before being restrained.

The principal called Roanin's mother.

"There's been an incident."

Heidi Walker was frightened, but as she hurried to the Humble school that day in 2014, she felt strangely relieved.

She had warned school administrators months earlier that her 5-year-old had been diagnosed with a disability similar to autism. Now they would understand, she thought. Surely they would give him the therapy and counseling he needed.

Walker knew the law was on her side. Since 1975, Congress has required public schools in the United States to provide specialized education services to all eligible children with any type of disability.

But what she didn't know is that in Texas, unelected state officials have quietly devised a system that has kept thousands of disabled kids like Roanin out of special education.

Over a decade ago, the officials arbitrarily decided what percentage of students should get special education services — 8.5 percent — and since then they have forced school districts to comply by strictly auditing those serving too many kids.

Their efforts, which started in 2004 but have never been publicly announced or explained, have saved the Texas Education Agency billions of dollars but denied vital supports to children with autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, epilepsy, mental illnesses, speech impediments, traumatic brain injuries, even blindness and deafness, a Houston Chronicle investigation has found.

More than a dozen teachers and administrators from across the state told the Chronicle they have delayed or denied special education to disabled students in order to stay below the 8.5 percent benchmark. They revealed a variety of methods, from putting kids into a cheaper alternative program known as "Section 504" to persuading parents to pull their children out of public school altogether.

"We were basically told in a staff meeting that we needed to lower the number of kids in special ed at all costs," said Jamie Womack Williams, who taught in the [Tyler Independent School District](#) until 2010. "It was all a numbers game."

Texas is the only state that has ever set a target for special education enrollment. records

### A Chronicle Investigation

In Texas, unelected state officials have devised a system that has kept thousands of disabled kids out of special education. Read other installments in the series here.

#### About this series

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**Part 2:** Schools push students out of special education to meet state limit

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show.

It has been remarkably effective.

In the years since its implementation, the rate of Texas kids receiving special education has plummeted from near the national average of 13 percent to the lowest in the country — by far.

In 2015, for the first time, it fell to exactly 8.5 percent.

If Texas provided services at the same rate as the rest of the U.S., 250,000 more kids would be getting critical services such as therapy, counseling and one-on-one tutoring.

"It's extremely disturbing," said longtime education advocate Jonathan Kozol, who described the policy as a cap on special education meant to save money.

"It's completely incompatible with federal law," Kozol said. "It looks as if they're actually punishing districts that meet the needs of kids."



Heidi Walker hoped that Humble school officials would help her son Roannan adapt and cope when he entered kindergarten.

In a statement, Texas Education Agency officials denied they had kept disabled students out of special education and said their guideline calling for enrollments of 8.5 percent was not a cap or a target but an "indicator" of performance by school districts. They said state-by-state comparisons were inappropriate and attributed the state's dramatic declines in special education enrollments to new teaching techniques that have lowered the number of children with "learning disabilities," such as dyslexia.

In fact, despite the number of children affected, no one has studied Texas' 32 percent drop in special education enrollment.

The Chronicle investigation included a survey of all 50 states, a review of records obtained from the federal government, state governments and three dozen school districts, and interviews with more than 300 experts, educators and parents.

The investigation found that the Texas Education Agency's 8.5 percent enrollment target has led to the systematic denial of services by school districts to tens of thousands of families of every race and class across the state.

Among the findings:

- The benchmark has limited access to special education for children with virtually every type of disability. Texas schools now serve fewer kids with learning disabilities (46 percent lower than in 2004), emotional and mental illnesses (42 percent), orthopedic impairments (39 percent), speech impediments (27 percent), brain injuries (20 percent), hearing defects (15 percent) and visual problems (8 percent).

- Special education rates have fallen to the lowest levels in big cities, where the needs are greatest. Houston ISD and Dallas ISD provide special ed services to just 7.4 percent and 6.9 percent of students, respectively. By comparison, about 19 percent of kids in New York City get services. In all, among the 100 largest school districts in the U.S., only 10 serve fewer than 8.5 percent of their students. All 10 are in Texas.

- Students who don't speak English at home have been hurt the most. Those children currently make up 17.9 percent of all students in Texas but only 15.4 percent of those in special education. That 15 percent difference is triple the gap that existed when the monitoring system began.

Spokesmen for numerous school districts, including Humble, Houston and Tyler, said they have not denied special ed to any children with disabilities. Several said their rates had declined because they had used early intervention programs to reduce the number of disabled kids.

Education experts told the Chronicle that there is no evidence that the instructional techniques being used in Texas — which are in classrooms nationwide — lower special education percentages.

A Dallas ISD spokeswoman defended that district's low percentage by noting it "falls within the Texas state acceptable range of 0%-8.5%."

After receiving a list of the Chronicle's findings, a U.S. Department of Education spokeswoman said her office would look into the Texas policy.

"It is important that states carry out their responsibilities under the law to ensure that all children who are suspected of having a disability are evaluated in a timely manner to determine eligibility for special education and related services," said the spokeswoman, Dorie Nolt. "Once we have more information from state officials, we will determine if further actions are necessary."

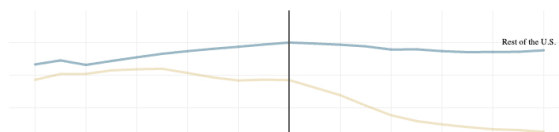
## A look at the drop in special education in Texas

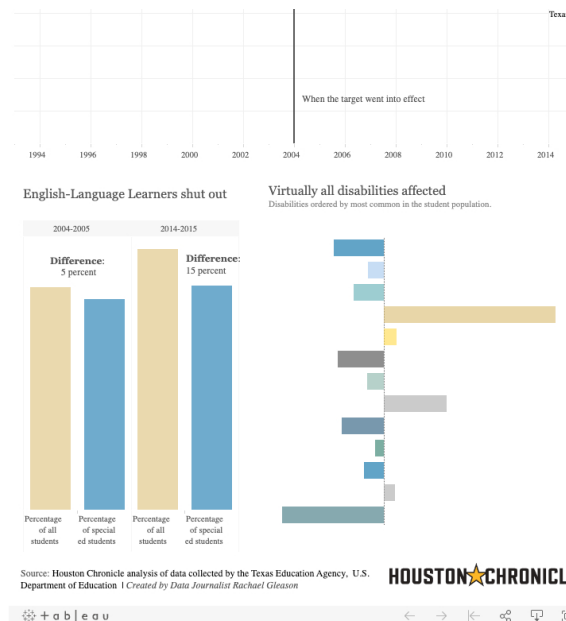
Thanks to an arbitrary target imposed more than a decade ago, Texas now gives special education services to a lower percentage of students than any other state.

Hover over the charts below to see who has been affected the most.

Note: The increase in autism identification is less than the nationwide increase, which has been nearly 200 percent.

A staggering drop





## Moving the number

There is no agreed-upon number for what percentage of kids have a disability that requires special education services.

The best approximation may be 15.4 percent. That's how many U.S. kids ages 2-8 whom doctors have diagnosed with a mental, behavioral or developmental disorder, [according to a March 2016 study by the federal Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#).

The U.S. has never served that many students in special education, but it has inched closer over time as society has become more aware of disabilities.

By 2000, according to data collected by the federal government, 13.3 percent of kids got some form of specialized education services — even if it was just 20 minutes of speech therapy per week.

In Texas, 12.1 percent of kids got services that year, the ninth-lowest rate in the nation.

Nevertheless, the Texas Education Agency decided the percentage was too high, according to interviews with dozens of former agency employees.

Several said the agency was worried about money. On average, educating a special ed child is twice as expensive, and the federal government pays only one-fifth of the extra costs, leaving the rest to states and school districts — a cost that totaled \$3 billion in Texas in 2002.

"There was always a concern about over-identification of special ed students and the costs associated with that," said Ron McMichael, the deputy commissioner for finance at the time.

The concern grew in 2003, when lawmakers cut the TEA's budget by \$1.1 billion, forcing it to lay off 15 percent of staffers.

The next year, the agency set the target as one part of a new monitoring protocol known as the Performance-Based Monitoring Analysis System, or PBMAS. The instructions were clear: School districts could get a perfect score on that part of the scorecard by giving special education services to fewer than 8.5 percent of students. If they served more, they would lose points.

Districts that scored poorly on the PBMAS could be fined, visited by regulators, compelled to complete "Corrective Action Plans" or taken over entirely, the system manual said.

The system was developed under Commissioner Shirley Neeley Richardson, an appointee of then-Gov. Rick Perry.

Richardson said in an interview that the special education target was a "first stab" at addressing the problem of over-identification. She said it was data-based and the product of a collaborative process.

[But the TEA did not consult the federal government, Texas Legislature or State Board of Education before implementing the policy, records show.](#)

The agency said in its statement that it convened focus groups while creating the PBMAS. But it was unable to produce any documentation of that. None of the educators and advocates interviewed by the Chronicle remembered focus groups.

The TEA also was unable to produce any records about why 8.5 percent was chosen as the target. It acknowledged in its statement that there is no research that establishes 8.5 percent as ideal.

Four agency officials set the benchmark, former employees said: special education director Eugene Lenz; his deputies, Laura Taylor and Kathy Clayton; and accountability chief Criss Cloutd.

The only one who agreed to speak with the Chronicle, Clayton, said the choice of 8.5 percent was not based on research. Instead, she said, it was driven by the statewide average special education enrollment.

Reminded that the statewide average was nearly 12 percent at the time, Clayton paused.

"Well, it was set at a little bit of a reach," she said. "Any time you set a goal, you want to make it a bit of a reach because you're trying to move the number."



Roanin Walker lies on the couch after his mother corrected him for arguing with his siblings over a video game. Roanin has been diagnosed with with attention deficit disorder, anxiety and "significant sensory processing deficits," a condition similar to autism.

## A special child

Heidi Walker and her husband, Trevor, first suspected that their fourth child was different when he wandered out of their house early one summer morning in 2011.

He was 2 years old. The sun had just appeared behind the two-story home on the outskirts of Casper, Wyo., when Heidi heard the front door slam shut.

She found Roanin standing in his diaper on the sidewalk, his brown hair blowing in the wind as he stared into the distance. She called to him. He didn't respond.

Heidi was terrified.

Soon, more trouble arose. Roanin constantly chewed on his clothes. He growled at strangers. He rarely made eye contact.

At home, he could be a normal kid. He loved playing Just Dance with his older sisters and Pokémon with his younger brother.

But in crowds and commotion, he broke down, often covering on the ground and covering his eyes and ears. Sometimes, he became aggressive.

The issues intensified when the Walkers moved to Texas so Trevor could take a job as a maintenance manager at an oil company.

They put Roanin in a church preschool, allowing Heidi to fulfill a dream of starting a photography business. But he struggled.

At the school Christmas show, he got so overwhelmed that he jumped off the top row of the choral riser. A teacher caught him. He refused to let go and lay in her arms for the next hour, wide-eyed, rocking back and forth.

Afterward, a teacher suggested the family ask [Humble ISD](#) to put him in a therapy preschool.



Roanin Walker jumps while playing a video game against his father, Trevor Walker, in front of his younger brother, Tiernen Walker. At home, Roanin can be just like a normal kid, his parents said.

The district conducted a partial evaluation but deemed his problems too "inconsistent" for the program, school records show.

Eventually, the Walkers took Roanin out of preschool and paid for the therapy they could afford.

A psychologist hired by the family determined Roanin had ADHD, generalized anxiety and "significant sensory processing deficits," a condition similar to autism, medical records show.

Heidi and Trevor were hesitant to put him on medication. Fearful of side effects, they tried natural remedies, including vitamins, oils and diet changes. Nothing worked.

As kindergarten approached, Heidi requested a meeting with Shadow Forest Elementary, where Roanin was to attend.

They met early in the summer of 2014, long before the beginning of the school year. Heidi brought medical records, hoping to persuade administrators to give her son extra help.

She did not formally request special ed. She didn't know she had to. And the administrators did not offer to evaluate Roanin.

Still, the meeting seemed to go well. The administrators promised they would do everything they could to help Roanin. Heidi believed them.



Tianny Jenkins reflects during a quiet moment at her family's tiny southeast Houston apartment. HISD ignored her mother's request for a special education evaluation, even as the 10-year-old was forced to repeat both second and third grades.

## An array of tactics

Many Texas school districts have interpreted the Texas Education Agency monitoring system as a strict ban on serving more than 8.5 percent of students in special education, teachers and administrators said.

"We live and die by compliance," said Haley Martin-Dean, the special education director in Seguin ISD, near San Antonio. "You can ask any special ed director; they'll say the same thing: We do what the TEA tells us."

Districts that have resisted the target have been forced to act by the state, which requires some districts with high special ed rates to write "Corrective Action Plans" detailing how they will reduce their enrollments.

In all, more than 96 percent of districts have reduced their special ed rates since 2004. [🔗](#)

They have used a broad array of tactics, according to interviews and a review of hundreds of Corrective Action Plans and other district records.

Many districts have discouraged parents from formally requesting special ed eligibility evaluations, in part because federal law states that schools must respond to written requests.

In [Marlin ISD](#), near Temple, for example, district leaders promised the state in a Corrective Action Plan that they would reduce their special ed numbers by creating a brochure telling parents about assistance available outside of special ed.

Districts also have deterred requests by falsely telling families they must pay for evaluations, that there's a waiting list, or that kids can be tested only once every two years, according to parents and advocates.

Maritza Woodard said that when she approached [Klein ISD](#) about her 15-year-old daughter, who has bipolar disorder, they gave her a list of private schools that they said could help her better.

Other parents have been ignored altogether.

Jocelyn Baty requested an evaluation from [Houston ISD](#) in May 2014. [The district received the written request, school records show.](#) But despite the law, it never responded, even after Baty's daughter had to repeat second grade and third grade.

"I don't understand why they won't help," said Baty, who lives in a southeast Houston housing project.

HISD officials declined comment on the case but attributed reductions in the district's special education enrollment to improved instruction."

Teachers also have found it harder to request special education evaluations.

[Karnack ISD](#), in East Texas, responded to the PBMAS system by requiring teachers to hold three meetings with colleagues before requesting a student be evaluated, [according to a Corrective Action Plan.](#)

In nearby [Henderson ISD](#), the district took all of the evaluation-request forms out of the schools and put them in the central office, where they could be accessed only with permission from supervisors.

Some districts have created committees to review evaluation requests before processing them.

"They sit you down and basically interrogate you about whether this kid really needs to be evaluated for special ed services, and if you really think that, and if you're sure," said Melanie Urbis, a math teacher who dealt with a committee in [West ISD.](#)

In one district that set up a panel, [Austin ISD](#), the number of evaluations dropped 52 percent in two years, records show.

Other districts have deployed more unusual tactics.

[Morgan ISD](#), near Fort Worth, promised the state it would lower its rate by "thoroughly reviewing" all special ed kids who transfer in to see if they could manage without services.

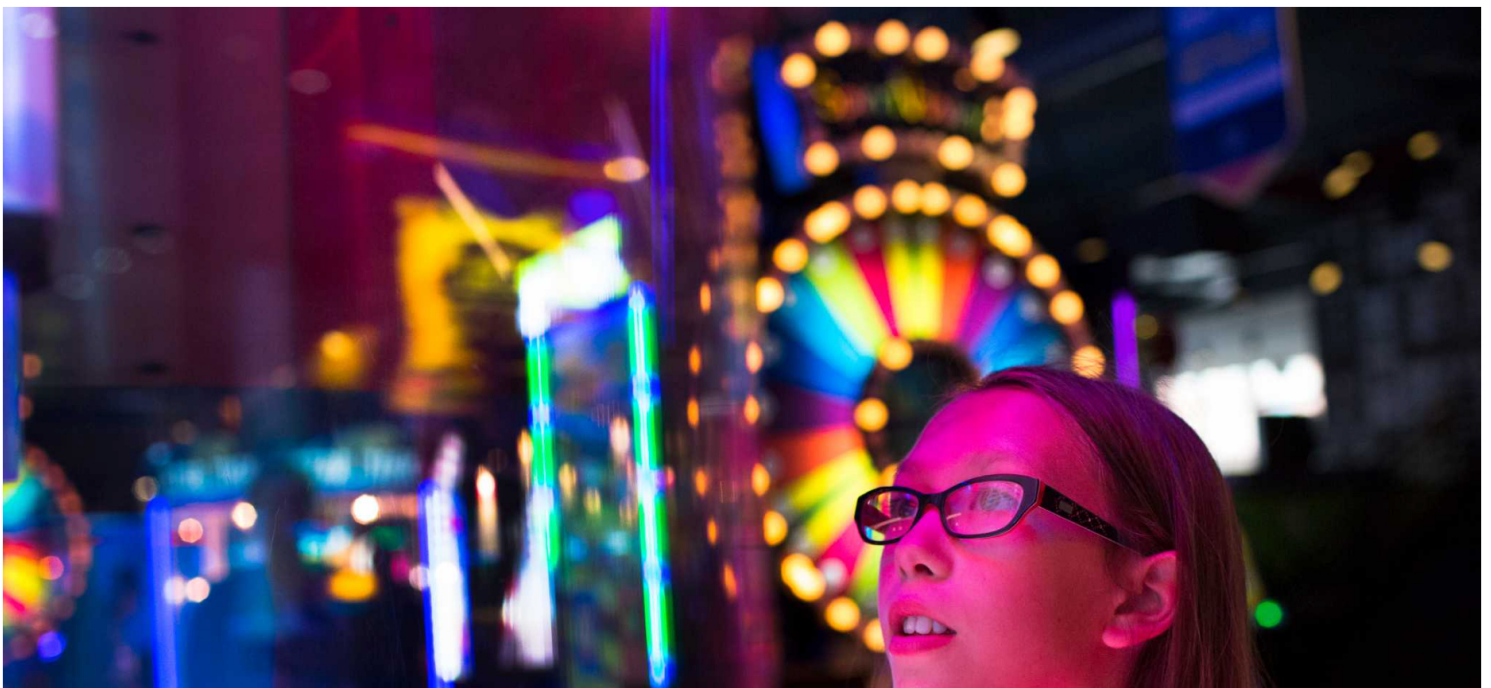
In [Galveston ISD](#), teachers have invited private therapists to come into class and provide for-fee services, internal district emails show.

And according to one speech therapist, [Spring ISD](#) came up with a new rule that almost defied belief: The inability to pronounce R's, one of the clearest signs that speech therapy is required, was no longer enough to qualify for services.

"It was ridiculous," said the therapist, Sabina Duhon.



Blanca Medina has been diagnosed with bipolar disorder, but her parents struggled to convince Klein ISD to give the 15-year-old special education services. When they first approached the district, they said, the district responded by giving them a list of private schools.





Lily Barrera, 12, plays arcade games during a trip to Houston to spend time with her aunt. Barrera has a learning disability in reading, but instead of evaluating her for special education, Hallettsville ISD left her to languish in Section 504 and Response to Intervention.

## Lesser alternatives

One method that Texas has used to curtail special education has been specifically prohibited by the federal government.

It involves "Response to Intervention," a new approach to teaching low-performing students.

The U.S. Department of Education has approved RTI but said schools cannot require teachers to try it before referring a student to be evaluated for special ed.

Many Texas schools have done just that.

In Gatesville ISD, near Fort Hood, officials told the state in a 2010 Corrective Action Plan that they had enacted a new policy to reduce special ed:

"No referral may proceed without documentation that RTI has been fully implemented."

Teachers and administrators from across Texas said their districts have adopted similar policies. Some said RTI has helped some students, but others said it has been used to keep children out of needed services for years.

"What happens is there are kids that you know right from the beginning have challenges and need special ed, and you have to try all of these interventions that you know won't work," said Arleen Glancy, who retired from Lamar CISD in January. "It extremely slows up the process."

Similarly, schools have averted special ed by giving disabled kids "Section 504 status."

The status, which refers to a section of the federal Rehabilitation Act, is aimed at preventing discrimination through accommodations, such as preferential seating or extra time on tests. It does not typically provide any services.

Records show that schools spend little on Section 504. Last year, Spring Branch ISD's budget for Section 504 was \$2,624 for 1,230 students — about \$2 per kid, far less than the thousands spent on a typical year of special ed.

Also, Response to Intervention and 504 plans do not have the same legal accountability of special education and do not require parent input.

That is how Lilly Barrera ended up in RTI and 504 for four years without her mother knowing. The 11-year-old, who has a learning disability in reading, was put in both programs in first grade by Hallettsville ISD, in rural Central Texas. Her accommodations included preferential seating, leniency in grading and "verbal praise for accomplishments," records show.

Neither RTI nor 504 worked. But instead of seeing if Lilly qualified for special ed, the district kept the same programs in place.

She entered sixth grade this fall with a third-grade reading ability — and a medical diagnosis of full-scale depression, caused by years of failing.

About 2.6 percent of Texas students now have Section 504 status, up from 1.3 percent in 2004, according to federal estimates. The current national average is 1.5 percent.

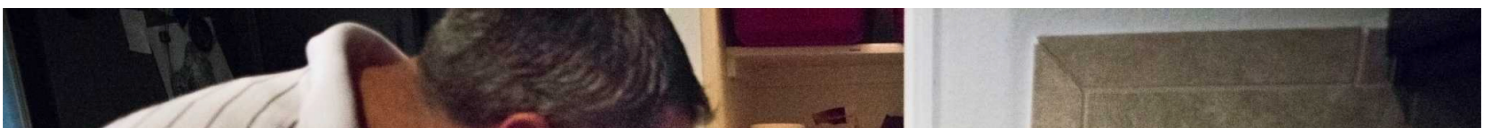
Many kids in Section 504 in Texas have dyslexia. State officials have said that's appropriate because of the mildness of the disability. But many experts disagreed, saying kids with dyslexia need special ed to be able to read.

"All of the extra test-taking time in the world isn't going to do anything about the fact that these kids' brains cannot process the information," said Paula Tallal, a professor of neuroscience at Rutgers University.

"They need services."



Lilly Barrera, right, helps her sisters Saira and Emily make cupcakes during a visit to their aunt in Houston in July 2016.





Roanin Walker tries to hide in a food pantry on a July 2016 morning despite efforts by his father, Trevor Walker. Roanin can easily become overwhelmed by seeing other people.

## Another denial

Heidi Walker arrived at Roanin's school on the day of the playground incident feeling embarrassed but hopeful.

She left angry.

Shadow Forest Elementary administrators did not offer to provide any therapy or counseling.

Instead, Heidi recalled, they implied she was a bad parent and urged her to medicate Roanin.

At home, the Walkers got in a fight. Trevor, who opposed medication, said Heidi just needed to be stricter with Roanin. Heidi said Trevor was at work too often to make that determination.

Ultimately, they agreed to try medication. But on the recommendation of a friend, they also formally requested a special ed evaluation, [according to an October 2014 email](#).

Again, the school declined an evaluation and responded with a different suggestion: How about Section 504?

As they discussed the idea, Roanin's teacher noted that she had already tried giving him preferential seating and advance warning before schedule changes. "None of the above efforts helped for any extended period of time," [she wrote in one memo](#).

Nevertheless, the [504 plan](#) issued that month centered on those exact accommodations, in addition to giving Roanin "planned breaks" during the day.

Records show that teachers did not even bother to fully document the plan's implementation. They were supposed to record their progress each week, but Roanin's file included only a few forms, none fully completed.

Roanin's meltdowns – and academic performance – worsened.

In the spring of his kindergarten year, Heidi again verbally requested a special ed evaluation.

Again, the school evaded her. Roanin's IQ was too high for services, administrators claimed.

[The federal government has said that is not a valid reason to deny special ed to a disabled child](#).

But Heidi didn't know that.







Steven Aleman of the advocacy group Disability Rights Texas complains about the Texas Education Agency's special ed enrollment target at a nearly-empty public meeting in June 2016 in Austin. The TEA did not directly address the complaint.

## Disproportionate impact

The Texas Education Agency special education target has affected disabled kids across the state, particularly those who live in big cities or in homes where English is not spoken.

Before the system began, English Language Learners were slightly less likely than others to be in special education.

Today, while 8.5 percent of Texas students are in special education, only 7.3 percent of English Language Learners are receiving those services.

Graciela Reyes-McDonald, a bilingual psychologist who works with school districts in the Houston area, said the gap has grown three-fold because parents who do not speak English have found it harder to navigate the new obstacles that schools have erected to reduce their special education numbers.

"There are so many more hoops to jump through before getting a special ed evaluation, and they don't know how to jump through them," she said.

The statistics on big cities are even more striking.

Urban areas have the most need for special ed because they have high rates of disability risk factors such as poverty, lead poisoning and prematurely born babies. That is why New York, Baltimore and Detroit serve about 20 percent of kids.

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In Texas, however, large school districts have been the most enthusiastic about lowering special ed rates. Many have pushed their percentages far beyond the 8.5 percent threshold.

Fort Bend ISD, for example, gave services to nearly 10 percent of students before the PBMAS began. The district got down to 8.5 percent by 2007 and then kept going. Today, its rate is just 6.2 percent.

Deena Hill, who became Fort Bend's special educator director in June 2015, said she had been troubled by the low rate ever since she started. She said some teachers were inappropriately using Response to Intervention to delay evaluations. She acknowledged that PBMAS was part of the reason.

"It's something that's always in the back of your mind," she said. "You're being graded."

Hill said she was working to increase the number of special education students through better training.

Overall, Texas has above-average rates of disability risk factors, making it even more surprising that it has the lowest special ed rate in the country.

What has happened to the kids who haven't gotten services?

Parents have pulled thousands of them out of public school in favor of home schooling or expensive private schools, according to interviews and data.

Others have been left to languish in regular classrooms without the individualized help they need, advocates said.

Many have fallen behind, become depressed and been suspended or expelled, the advocates said. Some have even entered the criminal justice system or otherwise required intensive adult services that cost far more than special education, they said.

"Research has shown that special ed does work," said Padmaja Sarathy, a former Fort Bend special ed manager who now works as a consultant. "So by denying that to some students, we are creating an underclass of children." [🐦](#)



Roanin Walker walks through a park looking for pine cones with his mother, Heidi Walker and younger brother, Tiernan Walker. Roanin loves learning about science and math, but he has trouble when in school.

## Only one choice

When Heidi Walker saw the police outside Shadow Forest Elementary in February 2016, she knew they were there for her son.

Minutes earlier, she had gotten a frantic call from the principal:

Come here. Hurrv.

When she arrived, she was told her first-grader had run away.

Fortunately, a teacher located Roanin by the school track. The principal sent him home with an out-of-school suspension.

It was his eighth suspension of the year.

The next week, he was suspended twice more — for slapping another student and for banging a projector remote on a table, school records show.

Records also show Roanin's academic performance plunged.

Between the middle of kindergarten and the middle of first grade, Roanin went from scoring in the 67th percentile in letter knowledge to the 16th percentile.

The suspensions and failures took a toll. Roanin became depressed. He stopped leaving his room. One afternoon, after getting in a fight with his brother over a video game, he began scratching himself in the face.

"I don't deserve to live," he cried.

Heidi and Trevor became scared. They felt they had only one choice.

They pulled their son out of school before first grade ended.

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## Heidi Walker talks about her son, Roanin

### 'No way'

Texas Education Agency officials have succeeded in keeping their special ed target from public view, according to records and interviews.

Almost nobody among those interviewed by the Chronicle knew about the 8.5 percent mark or even that Texas had the lowest special education rate in the country. Some couldn't believe it.

"No way," said Mike Moses, a former Dallas ISD superintendent and Texas education commissioner under Gov. George W. Bush who now teaches education at the University of North Texas.

Moses and fellow former Education Commissioner Lionel Meno both said they felt the policy clearly violated federal law.

The TEA said in its statement that it has sought public input about the PBMAS. But the only place it has done that has been in the Texas Register, a little-known state agency journal. A typical entry appeared on Page 5,579 of the July 18, 2014 edition.

The agency has avoided scrutiny by claiming other factors have caused the special ed drop.

When asked about the drop at a 2010 state Senate Education Committee hearing, Lenz did not mention the target.

"We fundamentally believe it has a lot to do with improving general education," he said.

People who have discovered the policy and complained have been ignored, records show.

At least four educators have contacted the agency to complain, emails show. The agency has not responded to any of them. 🐦

The TEA has responded to the only formal complaint it has received, which came from Disability Rights Texas, the only advocacy group that has found the policy. The agency response was it could not address the complaint unless there was proof a specific student had been treated illegally because of the policy.

Officials also appear to have shut down questions by blaming the federal government: Three school staffers appointed by the TEA to a task force that reviewed the PBMAS system after its implementation said they asked the agency about the special education target and were told that it was federally mandated.

"We were led to believe that it exists in every state," said one of the staffers, Matt Underwood, superintendent of [Stephenville ISD](#), near Abilene.

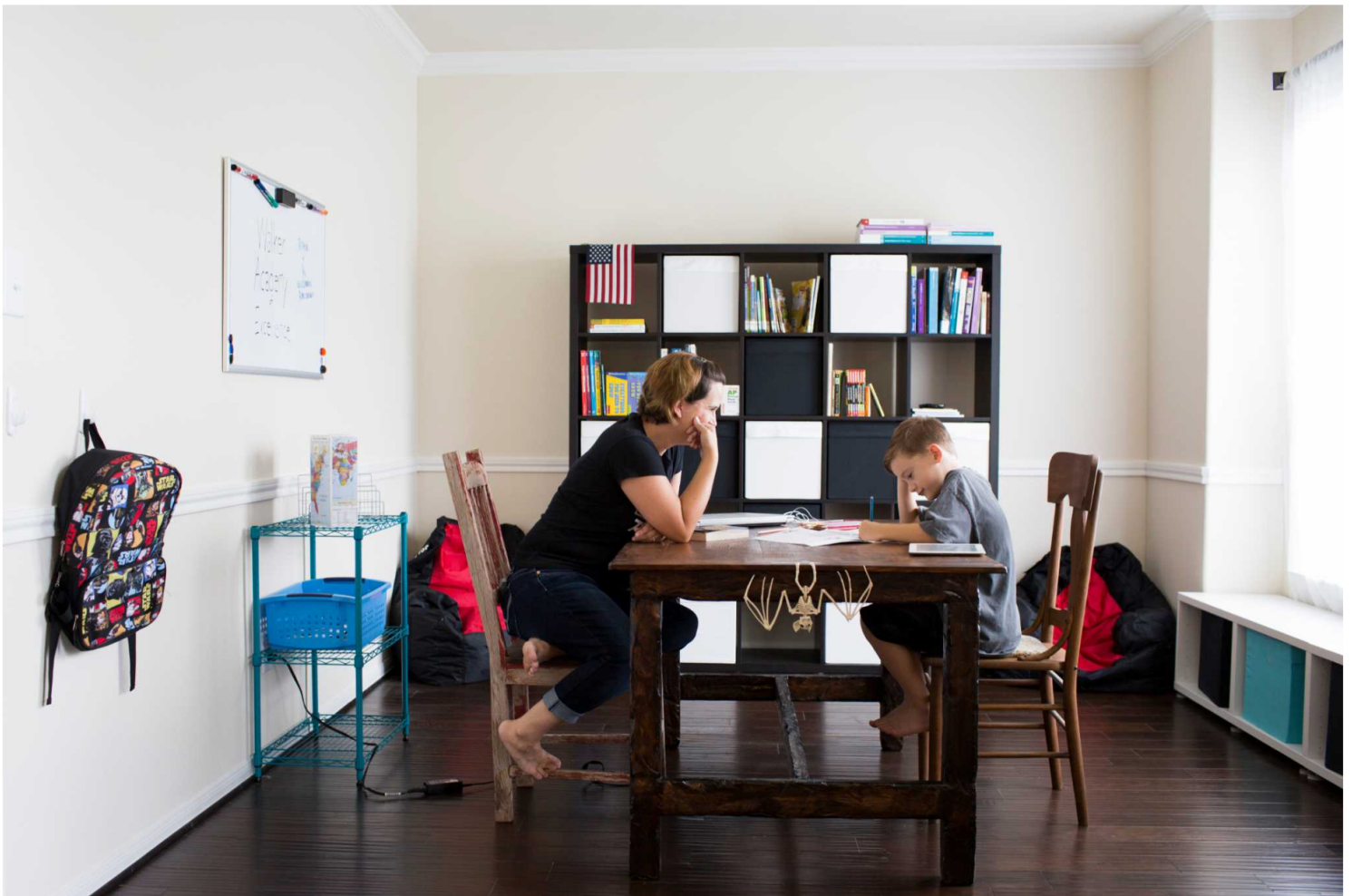
Underwood continued to believe that until he was contacted by the Chronicle, he said.

Still, in the years since the task force, he said he had already become worried about the policy.

Stephenville lowered its percentage of students receiving special ed services from 11 percent in 2004 to 8 percent today, a difference of more than 100 children, records show.

District officials have worked hard to find other ways to serve those students, Underwood said. But he still worries they missed some, shutting children with disabilities out of needed help.

"Some have probably fallen through the cracks," he said. "I can't say how many. Even one would be bad. One would be terrible."



Heidi Walker sits across from her son Roanin while he studies at his home classroom in Kingwood in August 2016. Heidi and her husband decided to homeschool Roanin after Humble ISD refused for months to evaluate him for special education.

## Too late

On a hot afternoon late last month, Heidi and Trevor Walker built a school for their son.

Heidi cleared out her makeshift photo studio near the kitchen, putting her cameras and lights into storage. Trevor hammered a few slabs of cedar wood into an oversize desk.

Together, they hung a whiteboard on the wall and wrote in a name for their creation: the Walker Academy of Excellence.

Over the summer, the district had finally agreed Roanin needed special ed — two years after the Walkers first asked formally for a special education evaluation during kindergarten in the fall of 2014. But the family decided it was too late. Roanin had grown to hate school, and his parents were convinced he wouldn't be treated fairly.

They wanted to put Roanin in private



They wanted to put Roanin in private school, but the oil downturn had forced Trevor to take a lower-paying job, and the family could not afford tuition.

So Heidi was preparing to become her son's math teacher, reading instructor and gym coach, in addition to her other responsibilities to Roanin and her other four children.

The Walkers were hopeful. They had seen home schooling work in Wyoming.

But they also knew there were some things they could not do. They could not offer electives. They could not help Roanin learn how to socialize. They could not give him a prom.

"We have special ed for a reason," Heidi said. "It's not like I want my kid to be in special ed. That's not something I hoped for. I want my kid to get an education, to get a job, to have a family. I want him to be happy. ... I know that won't happen if he doesn't get what he needs. If he doesn't get help, he won't live up to his potential, by half. Nobody wants that for their kid."

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Roanin Walker lies down on the lap of his father Trevor Walker at their Kingwood home one afternoon in July 2016.

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