

Houston officials attack summer school programs

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The November 4 edition of the *Houston Chronicle* carried an article by reporter Erika Mellon entitled “HISD (Houston Independent School District) takes red pen to summer school.”

The article's subheading reads, “To cut costs, district says it will slash hours, charge for some courses.” This specifically means charging tuition for summer 2011 enrichment courses for advanced students in math and science, while making entry into remedial summer courses more competitive for the academically needy students who have to make up failed coursework.

Depending on campus budgets, schools may have to cap the number of students they enroll. This implies a competition among students for space in summer school, although “students who performed the worst academically will be given priority under the plan.”

HISD Superintendent Terry Grier said he expects parents will be upset about the shorter hours, but the district has limited funds. Taking an arrogant swipe at working class families, Grier said, “There will be parents who were accustomed to this being a daycare for six weeks.”

The summer school day will shrink from six to four hours—8 a.m. to noon. For high schools, the hours will be “flexible,” from 8 a.m. until 5 p.m., with most courses offered by computer. There is no indication of whether the high school students who need to take summer courses to catch up on their academic work do in fact have computers at home.

Jeff Smith, vice president of policy for the National Summer Learning Association, criticized the HISD policy as going against the national trend of expanding summer school beyond offering remedial courses for failing students. “A lot of districts around the country are actually investing in comprehensive summer programs that are open to all kids in the district or at

least to all kids in high-need schools,” he said.

According to the *Chronicle*, studies have shown that summer school can keep all students from sliding back academically, with children from low-income families benefiting the most. About 80 percent of HISD students fall into that category.

Chuck Morris, who is HISD's chief academic officer, claimed that even with the cuts, the district is going to focus on improving the quality of summer school. Scapegoating teachers for poor academic performance in the school system, he said instructors with a track record of weak student growth on standardized tests will not be hired.

Extolling the virtues of efficiency and productivity, Morris said, “If you're going to have a summer program, it needs to have a laser focus in terms of what the student's needs are.” He added, “You can do that in a shortened time if you know what you are doing, if you have the tools and if you have a goal in mind.”

The implication is clear: “inferior” teachers—those who are unable to keep their students' standardized testing scores moving up consistently, for whatever nonacademic reason—need not apply, or at any rate will not be hired.

Last summer, HISD served 54,140 students—more than a quarter of its total enrollment—in tuition-free summer programs. Some schools also offered paid programs, charging advanced high school students to take courses to get ahead, although courses could be repeated for free if needed.

Morris said that summer school students who are attending because they failed the state-mandated Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills exam would not be charged for tuition. But enrichment programs, such as math and science camps for advanced students, would charge fees if the schools offering them do not

have enough money in their budgets to pay for them.

The number of students HISD can afford this coming summer will depend largely on how much it pays teachers. Teachers typically receive less per hour in summer than in the regular school year.

Thanks to a shortfall in federal funding, the district's summer school budget is tight this year, said HISD chief financial officer Melinda Garrett. The district usually gets about \$10 million in extra federal funds in April, but Garrett does not expect that to come in 2011.

The *Chronicle* article makes no mention of Texas' looming \$24 billion budget shortfall, which will undoubtedly have other socially disastrous effects on public education.



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