

HISD

Earned Autonomy Framework

Effective July 1, 2026

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Executive Summary

In July 2024, Houston ISD implemented the Defined Autonomy Framework (DAF), aligning levels of school autonomy with academic performance. The framework differentiated decision-making authority based on student outcomes and established consistent expectations across the system.

Over the past three years, the District has strengthened instructional quality, reinforced accountability standards, and built a performance-focused culture. During that time, HISD more than doubled the number of A- and B-rated schools. No student entered an F-rated campus at the start of the most recent school year, and 70,000 more students attended A- and B-rated campuses than the year prior. Student growth data across multiple grade levels have also shown measurable improvement, reflecting stronger instructional consistency across campuses.

This progress reflects the District's commitment to the **Houston Promise**: that zip code will not determine opportunity, that every student attends a high-quality school, and that by August 2027 all HISD schools will be A- or B-rated.

With three years of accountability data now available, the District is positioned to strengthen its approach to autonomy. **Beginning July 1, 2026, HISD will implement the Earned Autonomy Framework (EAF).** The Earned Autonomy Framework moves from single-year determinations to sustained, multi-year performance standards and incorporates achievement gap measures into eligibility criteria. Autonomy will be based primarily on demonstrated results over time rather than school type.

Under the Earned Autonomy Framework:

- Schools will be placed into one of five levels of autonomy.
- Eligibility will be determined by Texas Education Agency accountability ratings over multiple years and by White–Black and White–Hispanic achievement gaps in English Language Arts and Mathematics.
- The highest levels of autonomy (Levels 4 and 5) will require application for and approval of an 1882 Partnership Agreement and will operate under Board-approved performance contracts. All 1882 partnerships must be approved by the Board.
- All schools, regardless of autonomy level, must comply with state and federal law and applicable accountability requirements. Levels 3, 2, and 1 will continue to operate within defined District instructional and operational parameters to ensure consistent quality across the system.

The Earned Autonomy Framework builds on measurable progress. It strengthens the connection between sustained performance and decision-making authority while maintaining clear systemwide expectations. It is designed to accelerate continued improvement toward the Houston Promise and to prepare students for success in a Year 2035 workplace and world.

Evolution of the Framework

What the Defined Autonomy Framework Established

In July 2024, Houston ISD implemented the Defined Autonomy Framework (DAF) to differentiate levels of school autonomy based on academic performance.

The framework established four levels of autonomy and aligned decision-making authority with student outcomes. The DAF clarified expectations across the system. It reinforced that autonomy must correspond with results and that instructional quality is the primary driver of performance. Schools demonstrating stronger academic outcomes were granted greater authority over program design, curriculum implementation, scheduling, staffing, and budget decisions.

At the same time, the District maintained consistent instructional guardrails to ensure that all students—regardless of campus—had access to aligned curriculum, structured instructional delivery, and frequent feedback mechanisms. These systemwide expectations strengthened instructional consistency and reduced variability in campus performance. The Defined Autonomy Framework established a clear principle: effectiveness and autonomy go hand in hand.

Design Refinements Identified

As implemented, the DAF largely achieved its core objective. However, several design elements were intentionally identified for future refinement.

- First, autonomy levels were determined based on a single year of accountability data. While effective for initial differentiation, single-year data does not fully capture sustained performance over time.
- Second, Separate and Unique magnet schools were assigned the highest level of autonomy based on school category rather than performance criteria. Although many of these schools were among the highest achieving in the District, the categorical assignment did not fully align with the principle that autonomy should be earned through demonstrated results.
- Third, autonomy levels did not differentiate authority over instructional evaluation systems. All schools were required to participate in the District's teacher and principal evaluation systems, including pay-for-performance, spot observations, and required instructional strategies.
- Finally, autonomy determinations did not incorporate achievement gap measures. While overall campus performance was considered, sustained gaps between student groups were not factored into autonomy eligibility.

These refinements reflect maturation of the system, not a change in direction. With three consecutive years of accountability data now available, the District has a more accurate and stable view of sustained campus performance. The Earned Autonomy Framework builds on the foundation established in 2024 and strengthens the connection between sustained results, instructional authority, and long-term performance.

Core Principles of the Earned Autonomy Framework

The Earned Autonomy Framework (EAF) is guided by five principles that align decision-making authority with sustained academic performance and systemwide accountability.

1. **Sustained Performance Over Time: Autonomy is based on multi-year academic performance rather than a single year of results.** Sustained outcomes provide a more accurate measure of campus effectiveness and leadership stability. Schools must demonstrate consistent performance across accountability cycles to earn higher levels of autonomy. This approach reduces volatility and ensures that expanded authority reflects durable success rather than short-term gains.

2. **Achievement as the Primary Determinant: Eligibility for autonomy levels is anchored in Texas Education Agency accountability ratings.** These ratings reflect performance across student achievement, student progress, and closing the gaps measures under the state accountability system. For the highest levels of autonomy, achievement gap thresholds are also incorporated into eligibility criteria. This ensures that high overall performance is accompanied by progress across student groups.

3. **Instructional Authority is Earned: The Earned Autonomy Framework differentiates authority over instructional systems.** Under the Defined Autonomy Framework, instructional evaluation requirements were uniform across campuses. Under the EAF, schools demonstrating sustained high performance may apply for expanded authority over instructional delivery models, evaluation systems, and strategic design through performance agreements. Schools operating within Levels 3, 2, and 1 will continue to implement district instructional systems to ensure consistency and continuous improvement across the broader system.

4. **Contract-Based Autonomy for Highest Performers: The highest levels of autonomy (Levels 4 and 5) operate under formal performance agreements approved by the HISD Board of Managers.** These agreements define the scope of authority, performance expectations, renewal timelines, and accountability conditions. This contract-based model formalizes autonomy while preserving transparency, governance oversight, and measurable performance standards.

5. **System Integrity and Stability: All schools, regardless of autonomy level, must comply with state and federal law and applicable accountability requirements.** Levels 3, 2, and 1 operate within clearly defined district parameters related to curriculum alignment, instructional expectations, assessment, and student safety. The framework balances expanded authority for sustained high performers with consistent instructional quality across the system. It is designed to protect student outcomes while allowing successful campuses to innovate and scale effective practices.

Level 5 of Earned Autonomy

Level 5 represents the **highest level of autonomy within Houston ISD**. Eligibility is based on sustained, exemplary academic performance.

Eligibility Criteria

A school may apply for **Level 5 autonomy** if it has both:

- Earned an overall accountability score of 90 or higher in the most recent Texas Education Agency (TEA) accountability rating and in each of the three immediately preceding years (four consecutive years).
- Demonstrated White–Black and White–Hispanic achievement gaps of less than 25 percent in the most recent accountability cycle.

Schools that meet these criteria must apply for and receive approval of an 1882 Partnership Agreement to be granted Level 5 autonomy. Schools that meet the performance criteria but choose not to apply for an 1882 Partnership Agreement will be assigned to Level 3 autonomy. For each school year beginning in 2026–2027, the District will enter into no more than five new Level 5 1882 partnership agreements. All 1882 partnerships must be approved by the HISD Board of Managers. Renewals do not count toward this annual limit.

Scope of Autonomy

Schools operating at **Level 5** function under a Board-approved performance agreement. The agreement grants full autonomy in major operational and instructional areas, including:

- Program design
- Curriculum selection
- Instructional delivery model
- Master scheduling
- Budget and financial management
- Staffing decisions
- Teacher and principal evaluation systems
- Instructional strategies
- Purchased services

Level 5 schools may also request waivers or exceptions to District parameters, including school start times and testing calendars, as specified in the performance agreement. All Level 5 schools remain subject to state and federal law and applicable accountability requirements.



Contract Term & Accountability

Level 5 schools receive a five-year performance contract, subject to approval by the HISD Board of Managers. To maintain **Level 5 autonomy** and to qualify for contract renewal, schools must:

- Continue to earn accountability ratings of 90 or higher, and
- Reduce their initial achievement gaps by at least five percentage points over the five-year term.

Failure to meet performance benchmarks may result in modification or non-renewal of the agreement, consistent with Board policy and the terms of the contract. Level 5 autonomy formalizes sustained excellence through measurable performance standards and defined governance structures. It provides expanded authority while maintaining clear accountability expectations.

The District will maintain a defined total number of active 1882 Partnership Agreements at any given time to ensure quality oversight, consistent performance monitoring, and alignment to District priorities. This constraint ensures that expanded autonomy is matched with the capacity to uphold performance standards and protect student outcomes.

Level 4 of Earned Autonomy

Level 4 autonomy recognizes sustained high performance and provides expanded operational and instructional authority through a formal performance agreement.

Eligibility Criteria

A school may apply for **Level 4 autonomy** if it has both:

- Earned an overall accountability score of 90 or higher in three of the four most recent TEA accountability ratings, with the remaining year reflecting a score of no less than 80.
- Demonstrated White–Black and White–Hispanic achievement gaps of less than 30 percent in the most recent accountability cycle.

Schools meeting these criteria must apply for and receive approval of an 1882 Partnership Agreement to be granted **Level 4 autonomy**. All 1882 partnerships must be approved by the HISD Board of Managers. Schools that meet the performance criteria but do not apply for an 1882 Partnership Agreement will be assigned to Level 3 autonomy. Beginning in the 2027–2028 school year, the District will enter into no more than five new Level 4 1882 partnership agreements annually. Renewals do not count toward this limit.

Scope of Autonomy

Level 4 schools operate under a Board-approved performance agreement. The agreement grants broad authority across major areas, including:

- Program design
- Curriculum selection
- Instructional delivery model
- Master scheduling
- Budget and staffing decisions
- Teacher and principal evaluation systems
- Instructional strategies
- Purchased services

Level 4 schools may request waivers or exceptions to District parameters, including school start times and testing calendars, as defined in the performance agreement. All Level 4 schools remain subject to state and federal law and applicable accountability requirements.



Contract Term & Accountability

Level 4 schools receive a three-year performance contract, subject to approval by the HISD Board of Managers. To maintain **Level 4 autonomy** and qualify for renewal, schools must:

- Continue to earn accountability ratings of 90 or higher, and
- Reduce their initial achievement gaps by at least five percentage points over the three-year term.

Failure to meet performance benchmarks may result in modification or non-renewal of the agreement consistent with the contract terms. Level 4 provides expanded authority to schools demonstrating sustained high performance while maintaining defined performance expectations and governance oversight.

The District will maintain a defined total number of active 1882 Partnership Agreements at any given time to ensure quality oversight, consistent performance monitoring, and alignment to District priorities. This constraint ensures that expanded autonomy is matched with the capacity to uphold performance standards and protect student outcomes.

Level 3 of Earned Autonomy

Level 3 autonomy applies to schools demonstrating sustained strong academic performance within the District system.

Eligibility Criteria

A school will be assigned **Level 3 autonomy** if it has both:

- Earned only A or B accountability ratings in each of the three most recent TEA accountability cycles.
- Demonstrated White–Black and White–Hispanic achievement gaps of less than 30 percent in the most recent accountability cycle.

Schools that qualify for Level 4 or Level 5 performance thresholds but do not apply for or receive approval of an 1882 Partnership Agreement will also be assigned Level 3 autonomy.

Scope of Autonomy

Level 3 schools are granted broad decision-making authority across major operational areas, including:

- Program design
- Curriculum implementation
- High-quality instructional programs (such as International Baccalaureate, Montessori, Performing Arts, etc.)
- Master scheduling
- Budget and staffing decisions
- Purchased services

Level 3 schools operate within District instructional systems. Schools at this level:

- Participate in the District's teacher and principal evaluation systems
- Participate in the pay-for-performance model
- Implement required instructional structures, including spot observations and on-the-job coaching
- Follow District-designated instructional strategies and systemwide expectations

Level 3 schools may request limited exceptions to certain District parameters, including school start times and testing calendars, subject to District approval.

Accountability & Mobility

Level 3 schools remain within District governance. The District may change autonomy levels annually based on preliminary TEA accountability ratings released prior to the start of the school year. Should final ratings differ from preliminary ratings, the District may adjust the autonomy level accordingly. **Level 3** reflects sustained strong performance within a defined District instructional framework.

Level 2 of Earned Autonomy

Level 2 autonomy applies to schools demonstrating stable academic performance that does not yet meet the thresholds for Level 3.

Eligibility Criteria

A school will be assigned **Level 2 autonomy** if it has both:

- Earned at least one accountability rating between 75 and 79 (inclusive) across the three most recent TEA accountability cycles.
- Earned no accountability rating below 75 during that same period.

Scope of Autonomy

Level 2 schools retain authority over core operational areas while operating within defined instructional parameters designed to maintain academic progress. In addition to the District-wide expectations outlined later in this document, **Level 2** schools must adhere to the following:

- Curriculum: Schools must select Reading/Language Arts, Mathematics, and Science curricula from a District-approved list.
- Master Schedule: Schools must develop a master schedule that meets District-established minimum instructional minutes for Reading/Language Arts, mathematics, and/or science.
- Purchased Services and Programs: All purchased services and programs must receive Central Office approval.

Level 2 schools continue to:

- Participate in the District's teacher and principal evaluation systems
- Participate in the pay-for-performance model
- Implement required instructional structures, including spot observations and on-the-job coaching
- Follow District-designated instructional strategies and systemwide expectations

Accountability & Mobility

The District may change autonomy levels of a **Level 2** school annually based on preliminary TEA accountability ratings released prior to the start of the school year. Should final ratings differ from preliminary ratings, the District may adjust the autonomy level accordingly. **Level 2** maintains operational flexibility while ensuring instructional consistency and measurable progress.

Level 1 of Earned Autonomy

Level 1 autonomy applies to New Education System (NES) schools and Special Focus schools.

Applicability

Level 1 includes:

- All NES schools
- Future 2 schools
- Special Focus schools that have not earned eligibility for Levels 2, 3, 4, or 5. A school may also be designated a special focus school if the school experiences a precipitous drop in achievement (more than 10 points in one year, 16 points in two years) and earns below 75 on the last accountability rating.

Scope of Autonomy

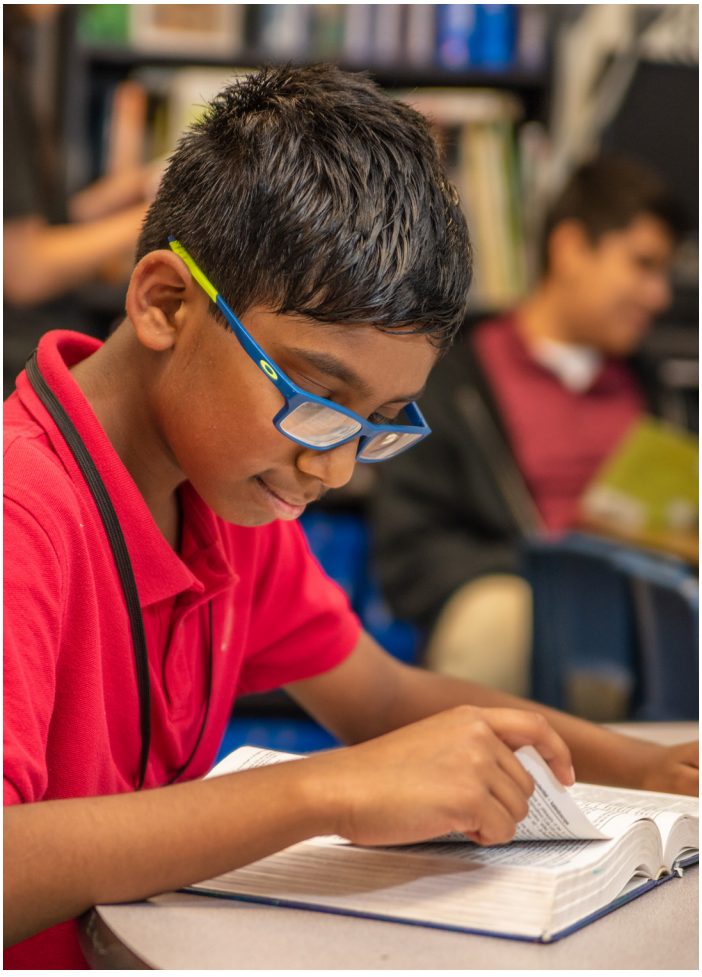
Level 1 schools operate within defined instructional and operational structures designed to support consistent academic improvement.

NES Schools

NES schools follow a well-defined instructional model and established procedures for curriculum implementation, scheduling, staffing, and instructional delivery. NES schools with magnet programs may continue to offer those programs; however, magnet implementation must align with the NES instructional model. Future 2 designated schools are considered a part of NES.

NES schools maintain **Level 1 autonomy**. However, if a NES school achieves an A rating for three consecutive years, it may request to leave the NES orbit. If granted, the NES school would transition the following year:

- For example, School A earns an A rating in 2025, 2026, and 2027. After receiving its third consecutive A rating in 2027, which is confirmed at the beginning of the 2028 school year, the school submits a request to exit the NES model for the 2029 school year. Upon approval, School A transitions out of NES beginning in the 2029–2030 school year.



Future 2 Schools

Future 2 schools operate within the **Level 1 autonomy** structure and are designed to implement emerging instructional or operational models aligned to District priorities. These schools are held to the same performance expectations and accountability timelines as other **Level 1** schools.

Special Focus Schools

Special Focus schools operate with limited autonomy and are subject to District-determined instructional and operational requirements.

Generally, Special Focus schools:

- Must implement District-designated curriculum
- Must follow a master schedule meeting District-established minimum instructional minutes
- May lose autonomy over budget decisions

Special Focus schools will remain at **Level 1** for three years before reevaluation.

Accountability & Mobility

Special Focus schools are reevaluated after three years to determine eligibility for a different autonomy level. **Level 1** ensures structured instructional implementation while maintaining clear performance expectations.

Movement Between Levels

The Earned Autonomy Framework provides defined pathways for schools to move between autonomy levels based on performance.

Levels 4 & 5

Levels 4 and 5 operate under Board-approved performance agreements. Movement into or out of these levels is governed by the terms of the contract, including performance benchmarks, renewal conditions, and Board approval requirements.

Schools that fail to meet performance benchmarks outlined in their agreement may have the agreement modified or not renewed, consistent with contract terms.

Levels 3 & 2

Levels 3 and 2 may change annually based on performance. Autonomy levels for these schools will be determined each year after the release of preliminary TEA accountability ratings and prior to the start of the school year. If final accountability ratings differ from preliminary ratings, the District may adjust the autonomy level accordingly. This structure ensures that autonomy reflects the most current performance data while providing clarity prior to the beginning of the school year.

Level 1

Level 1 NES schools and Special Focus schools remain at Level 1 autonomy for three years before reevaluation. The movement structure is designed to align autonomy with sustained performance while maintaining stability in school operations.



District-Level Expectations & Parameters

All schools, regardless of autonomy level, must comply with state and federal law and applicable accountability requirements.

In addition, Levels 3, 2, and 1 operate within defined District expectations and parameters designed to ensure instructional consistency, operational stability, and student safety.

Unless otherwise specified in a Board-approved performance agreement, the following expectations apply to Levels 3, 2, and 1:

- District school calendar
- District-assigned start and end times, unless approved otherwise
- District-wide principal and teacher evaluations
- District-wide instructional monitoring, coaching, and feedback regimen
- District-wide orientation and professional development days (with designated campus flexibility where applicable)
- District-wide assessments
- District oversight and compliance requirements
- Instruction covering 100 percent of TEKS in core courses
- Lesson Objectives and Demonstrations of Learning (DOLs)
- Each campus leadership team member completing six spot observations per week
- Directives from the Division Superintendent, Chief of Schools, or Superintendent necessary to ensure student achievement and safety

These expectations are not intended to be exhaustive but establish the instructional and operational baseline for schools operating within the District system. The Earned Autonomy Framework balances expanded authority for sustained high performers with clear, consistent expectations that protect academic quality across all campuses.

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