

# THE FIRST TITLE

The key moments behind this historic season. **UTSA EXTRA. U1**



**EXPRESS-NEWS ONLINE EXCLUSIVE**

**DATABASE:** A searchable database of city employee salaries, from the chief veterinarian to the top cop. [ExpressNews.com/City-Salary](https://www.expressnews.com/City-Salary)

**SPORTS**

In best of times or a rebuild, Spurs culture is same. **C1**

# San Antonio Express-News

SUNDAY, DECEMBER 12, 2021 | EXPRESSNEWS.COM | Vol. 157, No. 73 | The voice of South Texas since 1865 | \$4.00

Sunshine: High 63, Low 46

## Schools still battle attendance woes

Nearly all S.A. districts down on enrollment since virus

By **Danya Perez and Claire Bryan**  
STAFF WRITERS

It was nearly 11 a.m. on a recent Wednesday when Christine Martinez and Ashley Lee approached the home of a family whose two children had missed 42 and 53 school days since the start of the fall semester.

"Is everything OK? Did they go to school today?" Martinez asked as their mother answered a knock.

The mother appeared unsur-

prised by the visit – it was not the first. Martinez and Lee are "student attendance liaisons" at Northside Independent School District, and the mother had failed to follow an agreement to put her children on a school bus to avoid tardiness and absences.

The mother was candid. No, her children had stayed home again that day. She works night shifts in the service industry, and it's hard for her to wake up in time to get her children ready for the bus or to take them to school herself. Neither of them want to

go to school, she added, and they've shown signs of anxiety.

"It's hard sometimes, because I feel like I can't be a good parent because I'm the only parent," the mother said.

The first school year of the coronavirus pandemic to require in-person classes is half over, and the search for missing students across San Antonio is as challenging as ever.

Northside ISD, the fourth-largest district in Texas, covers some of the fastest-growing sections of

*Schools continues on A19*



Jerry Lara / Staff photographer

**Cavella Lewis, left, and Roel Rincon, who are with Northside ISD, talk with Sharon Nunez-Lascari during a home visit.**



Sam Owens / Staff photographer

**Alana Castaneda, 27, applies ointment to the gunshot wound she suffered during an attempted carjacking early last month.**

## Town's residents troubled by growth

By **Annie Blanks**  
STAFF WRITER

Diane and Chuck McClaferty live and work on a Dripping Springs ranch. It's been in Chuck McClaferty's family for 85 years. They raise beef cattle. They keep honeybees.

And a proposed four-lane highway would run right through the middle of their land.

If it comes to pass, they'll lose the cattle and the bees. They'll lose the future they've imagined for their children and grandchildren since they moved onto the ranch 28 years ago.

"When you drive into Dripping from Austin, there's a big water tower that says, 'Welcome to the gateway to Hill Country,'" Chuck McClaferty said. "But they're taking away the Hill Country and putting down pavement."

Dripping Springs is a quiet, small town where you escape the big city to gaze upon clear waters and dark night skies. At least it was.

*Hill Country continues on A21*



Kin Man Hui / Staff photographer

**Homes are under construction near Dripping Springs, whose population has soared.**

## Staying upbeat in recovering

By **Jacob Beltran**  
STAFF WRITER

Alana Castaneda can feel her scar tissue hardening, pulling her jaw to the left. She cannot close her left eye, and she must wear an eye shield to keep it moist. Doctors are monitoring an accumulation of a "jelly-like" substance in her eyeball that, if it fails to dissipate, could sever her retina.

But after explaining the precarious status of her recovery, she says with a shrug and a smile: "It's all good. Everything in time."

## Artist shot in carjacking bid hasn't lost her sunny outlook

The 27-year-old's optimism exceeds what one might expect from someone who, more than a month ago, was shot in the face by a would-be carjacker outside Whole Foods at Alamo Quarry Market. Alana has maintained an upbeat outlook that friends and family say has been her trademark since she was growing up in the area of the South Texas Medical Center.

"She's not going to change, even though she faced what she faced," said her father, Johnny Castaneda, who projects a similar energy.

*Artist continues on A20*

## Dozens killed as tornado, storms tear through five states

By **Bruce Schreiner and Jim Salter**  
ASSOCIATED PRESS

MAYFIELD, Ky. – A monstrous tornado, carving a track that could rival the longest on record, ripped across the middle of the U.S. in a storm front that killed dozens and tore apart a candle factory, crushed a nursing home, derailed

a train and smashed an Amazon warehouse.

"I pray that there will be another rescue. I pray that there will be another one or two," Kentucky Gov. Andy Beshear said as crews sifted through the wreckage of the candle factory in Mayfield, where 110 people were working overnight Friday when the storm hit. Forty of them were rescued.

"We had to, at times, crawl over casualties to get to live victims," said Jeremy Creason, the city's fire chief and EMS director.

In Kentucky alone, 22 people were confirmed dead by Saturday afternoon, including 11 in and around Bowling Green. But Beshear said upward of 70 may have been killed when the twister touched down for more than 200

miles in his state. He also said the number of deaths could eventually exceed 100 across 10 or more counties.

A death toll of 36 across five states also numbers six people in Illinois, where the Amazon facility was hit; four in Tennessee; two in Arkansas, where a nursing home was destroyed; and two in Missouri.

If early reports are confirmed, the twister "will likely go down perhaps as one of the longest track violent tornadoes in United States history," said Victor Genzini, a researcher on extreme weather at Northern Illinois University.

The longest tornado on record, in March 1925, tracked for about 220 miles through Missouri, Illi-

*Tornado continues on A22*

GET THE MOST FROM YOUR SUBSCRIPTION



Express-News subscribers enjoy full access to [ExpressNews.com](https://www.expressnews.com), where you'll find breaking news, searchable archives, the e-edition print replica and more. It's already yours!



Build your savings **.70%** 18-Month APY Certificate

Learn More at [CreditHuman.com/EarnMore](https://www.CreditHuman.com/EarnMore)



Annual percentage yield (APY) accurate as of 12/1/21 and subject to change. \$500 minimum balance required to earn APY. A penalty may be imposed for early withdrawal. Actual certificate dividend rate and APY based on the dividend rate in effect on date of deposit. Dividend rates are fixed unless otherwise stated. The APY assumes funds remain on deposit until maturity. A withdrawal of dividends will reduce earnings. Federally insured by NCUA.

## FROM THE COVER

## SCHOOLS

From page A1

Bexar County but has seen an unprecedented enrollment decrease. It has lost more than 5,400 students in two years since peaking at 107,817 students months before the pandemic arrived.

Almost every other local school district also lost enrollment. Officials say there's no single reason for it.

A year ago, many students were learning on computer screens at home – or failing to learn, sometimes because they were not showing up. Officials say the disruptions are different this year but still related to the upheaval the virus caused – to the economy and families, their resources, work schedules, priorities and even their attitude toward school.

“There's social issues; loss of jobs, grief ... mental health issues ... lingering COVID effects, illnesses,” said Pam Gould, assistant director of student advocacy and school choice at Northside. “There's also fear, anxiety (about) coming back and being exposed. And not only being exposed to COVID, but also, of, ‘How much have I missed?’ and, ‘I'm not used to being exposed to people.’”

Parents are still adjusting to the changes the pandemic created. Older students have new responsibilities at home, new jobs or a newfound sense of freedom.

School districts have had to consider whether to ease or maintain their truancy policies. In many of them, the response remains basic: to knock on doors.

“You need motivation, and I'm here to be your cheerleader, I want to help you,” Martinez told the mother that Wednesday. “I know you are going through a lot ... But think about this: They are babies, they are both young. And right now, we are setting the pace for them.”

Northside's 13 liaisons spend most of their mornings searching for students and talking to parents, and in the afternoons they record their findings in a shared data system.

## Where are they?

Attendance at Northside is down even when compared to the hybrid nature of last year, when families could choose between virtual and classroom learning. As of November, Northside's attendance rate hovered right above 92 percent. It was about 94 percent at the same time last year and about 97 percent the year before.

Poor attendance is both an effect and a cause of the pandemic's damage. It drags down enrollment, a measure of how many students a district serves. The enrollment crisis is nationwide. In Texas and many other states, enrollment helps decide a district's state funding.

The obvious question – “Where are the children?” – is harder to explain this year, some observers say.

“For some parents, the fact of the matter is that they are still just waiting to see where the cookie crumbles with vaccines, the (coronavirus) variants and COVID,” said Ayla Dehghanpoor, director of marketing at the nonprofit Families Empowered, which encourages parents to understand and navigate school choice. “This is still a very real concern for lots of parents, particularly in San Antonio.”

Dehghanpoor thinks the pandemic has made parents more aware of their options. The organization has seen an increase of 17 percent in one-on-one family consulting in San Antonio since 2019 and has noticed much more engagement with its website. It currently helps nearly 17,000 area families.

Online learning gave parents a front-row seat to their children's education and a new way to think about how it should happen this year, Dehghanpoor said. Many chose to home-school. Some decided to explore other districts, charters or private schools they might not have considered before, even if it involved distant locations.

“Their kids have had so much upheaval and so much emotional trauma and social trauma over this past year and a half that they're not willing to try something new or just switch for the sake of switching,” she added. “Parents are taking a lot longer to make enrollment decisions and are doing it a lot more purposefully than I think we've seen in the past five to 10 years.”

An awareness of the pandemic's trauma has caused some districts, including Northside and San Antonio ISDs, to avoid previously routine responses to truancy. Both have instructed their out-



William Luther / Staff photographer

**Christine Martinez, right, and Ashley Lee, who are “student attendance liaisons” with Northside Independent School District, talk at Warren High School about the problem of increased school absences since the start of the coronavirus pandemic.**



Jerry Lara / Staff photographer

**After not making contact with a parent or guardian, Northside ISD student attendance liaisons Roel Rincon and Cavella Lewis, who is reflected in the window, leave a flyer in a door.**

reach specialists to not employ warnings, reports to law enforcement or the courts but instead try to open paths for struggling families to regain their school routines.

“We've changed the way we do attendance interventions completely,” Northside's Gould said. “The old way used to be punitive. Now it's much more about connecting and educating.”

Outreach at many school districts started in the early days of the pandemic, in spring 2020, with officials checking on students who weren't logging on. By last summer, it had evolved to deal with families that were not registering their kids for the new school year, requiring hundreds of calls and visits.

“Since the first day of school, they continued doing phone calls, home visits, email reach-outs,” Patricia Baumer, who directs the SAISD office of access and enrollment services. “We literally tried to get in touch with every single one of our families to emphasize that our schools are safe.”

The main struggle typically has been with the youngest students and high schoolers, for enrollment and attendance.

SAISD lost about 1,300 prekindergarten and kindergarten students this year. It dropped 400 in other elementary grades and 500 and 400 at the middle and high school levels, respectively.

Southside ISD had among the lowest percentage decreases in enrollment locally, but when it comes to attendance rates, its high school, pre-K and kindergarten students are roughly 5 percentage points lower than other grades, Superintendent Rolando Ramirez said. Overall attendance is 91 to 92 percent, he said.

At the lower grade levels, attendance issues have been mainly adult-driven, Ramirez said, as parents deal with transportation problems, might not want to take the little ones to school if their older children are staying home, or simply can't find the time to meet the routine.

“At the high school, you have students that have jobs, you have students that are taking care of their brothers and sisters,” he said. “And also you have students who we have issues with them not wanting to come to school.”

## Declining enrollment

San Antonio area enrollment numbers are down in nearly every school district since the 2018-19 school year. Even large districts with booming population growth, such as Northside ISD, have experienced a decline in the number of students attending their schools.

DISTRICT	2018-19	2019-20	2020-21	2021-22	% CHANGE (2018-19 to 2021-22)
Lackland	1,076	1,072	890	911	-15.3%
Harlandale	14,086	13,666	12,522	12,081	-14.2%
South San	8,939	8,533	8,267	7,922	-11.4%
North East	65,186	64,539	60,483	59,556	-8.6%
San Antonio	48,745	48,532	45,802	44,734	-8.2%
Somerset	4,158	4,111	4,021	3,958	-4.8%
Northside	106,501	107,817	103,151	102,381	-3.9%
Southwest	13,759	13,864	13,474	13,277	-3.5%
Southside	5,663	5,781	5,595	5,543	-2.1%
East Central	10,041	10,146	9,770	9,963	-0.8%
Alamo Heights	4,864	4,944	4,846	4,824	-0.8%
Ft. Sam Houston	1,590	1,543	1,501	1,630	2.5%
Judson	22,870	23,680	23,825	24,714	8.1%
Edgewood	10,234	9,887	9,152	NA*	NA*

\*NOTE: Edgewood did not have enrollment data available for 2021-22

Source: Texas Education Agency, individual school district reports Monte Bach / Staff artist

## Fewer students, less funding

At SAISD, this year's enrollment decline took district officials by surprise. In June, they presented the board of trustees with a proposed budget based on the expectation of regaining at least 1,500 of the 2,730 students lost since the 2019-2020 school year.

On Nov. 8, however, the board got a stark update; the district had lost 1,000 more students and was down to 44,734.

“We were hoping for maintaining stability, but we couldn't get a good feel for what the trends would be,” Baumer said.

Attendance was not good, either. The budget had predicted an attendance rate of at least 93 percent, a “conservative projection” based on historical data, officials said. But actual attendance has been between 85 and 88 percent.

If things don't improve, the enrollment loss will drop state funding by \$23.4 million, while the attendance decline will cost the district an additional \$27 million, meaning SAISD will face a budget shortfall of more than \$50 million.

School districts have a federal cushion against this kind of damage, Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief funds, or ESSER.

But like SAISD, most districts have been perplexed by their inability to predict enrollment and attendance.

“When both of those are down, it is a substantial hit to the system,” said North East ISD Superintendent Sean Maika, who noted that enrollment decreases this year are being seen in rural school districts, not just city and suburban ones.

NEISD, the second-largest local school district, has lost almost 5,000 students since 2019-2020, dropping its enrollment to 59,556. Attendance rates also dropped, from an average of 96 percent before the pandemic to 93 percent this year.

“The money is one thing, but you know, that is a lot of disruption of learning for students who are not coming to school regularly,” Somerset ISD Superintendent Saul Hinojosa said of a projected loss of \$1.8 million from more than 300 students per day not making

it to class. “We are trying to really address it.”

Before the pandemic, Somerset had averaged 95 or 96 percent daily attendance. This year, attendance is 92 percent. After years of steady growth, the district has lost 150 students since fall 2019 and now totals 3,958 students.

## Bucking the trend

Judson ISD was the only local school district to increase its total enrollment during every year of the pandemic, adding more than 1,000 students to reach a current total of 24,714.

Judson officials credit the district's open acceptance of transfers from other districts, free-to-all pre-K and population growth, though they said they did lose some students and that attendance rates are down.

Some charter schools also picked up enrollment. IDEA Public Schools, a large and rapidly growing statewide network, managed to gain 1,600 students in its San Antonio region this year and now totals 17,600 students, said Carlos Benavides, regional vice president of operations.

But he attributes these overall gains to IDEA's model, in which newer schools add a grade level each year. Only five of its 15 campuses in the region are operating at “full scale,” offering pre-K through 12th grade. The rest are still growing.

“San Antonio is a fairly new region,” Benavides said. “So we had a natural growth. ... But in the full-scale schools, we did see a little bit of a lower enrollment compared to previous years because of the pandemic. As we transitioned to in-person, because we believe in-person was the best way for our students to learn, there was some hesitation, still, from our families.”

Parents were frank about wanting to wait longer with their children at home, he said, even if it meant losing their seat and having to go through a lottery system again if they decided to return. But IDEA might have gained some of the students that other districts lost, with demand high at some campuses, Benavides said.

The charter network KIPP, which has seven campuses in San Antonio, said it saw a decrease of only about 40 students this year, leaving its total higher than in fall 2019.

District officials are hoping the spring brings improvement, now that vaccines are available for some younger students, but are wary of new variants of the coronavirus. The pressure to find families and spread a message of safety won't let up.

Every district is aware that a connection with families matters more than ever, officials said.

“Part of our culture is to show parents that we genuinely care for our students, and that was in place prior to the pandemic,” said Ramirez, the Southside ISD superintendent.

“So I don't think the approach is any different. But it's more about where parents see more evidence of it, because now we are talking about the lives of our children here. It's not just the education part.”

danya.perez@express-news.net | @DanyaPH  
claire.bryan@express-news.net