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## HISD magnet program gets a reprieve as budget hole shrinks

By **Jacob Carpenter** Updated 8:52 am, Tuesday, February 27, 2018



IMAGE 1 OF 3

Junior Valentin Roman, center, performs a titration with classmates as they help with an experiment during a presentation on biodiesel during a joint environmental science and bio-tech engineering class at the ... [more](#)

Houston ISD administrators do not expect to cut magnet programs or re-open the magnet application process ahead of the 2018-19 school year, an announcement likely to ease fears among parents who send their children to choice schools.

Houston ISD leaders said Monday they are lowering the district's projected budget deficit from about \$209 million to \$115 million, which would dramatically reduce the level of potential staff and program cuts.

The two announcements reflect the shifting nature of Houston ISD's plans for major changes throughout the district, which have provoked anxiety among many parents and staff members. District leaders are proposing changes to the district's magnet and

funding systems – with the goal of providing more resources and programs to students in lower-income neighborhoods while facing a significant budget deficit largely brought on by the state’s school finance law.

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Administrators are considering whether to phase out some magnet programs that have relatively little student interest or no consistent programming to align magnets so students can attend their school.

Administrators do not expect to cut many magnet programs, but any changes would not be made until 2019-20. Chief School Support Officer Mark Smith said the district did not want to rush any reductions that would force parents to immediately seek new options for their children.

“We would be doing a huge disservice to those families if those programs went away and they didn't have the same opportunities based on what they thought when they applied for those programs back in November or December,” Smith said.

Houston ISD leaders have proposed changes that would put more magnet programs in areas of the city that traditionally have lacked such programs. Magnet schools are more concentrated in higher-income areas, putting a greater burden on lower-income students to travel to magnet campuses. At the same time, some magnet campuses in higher-poverty schools have not attracted students, often due to perceptions about student safety.

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Administrators also have proposed cutting some magnet funding for select schools. Magnet allocations account for less than 5 percent of campus funding for most schools, though it is about 20 percent at a few of the district's highest-rated schools, such as DeBakey High School for Health Professions and The High School for the Performing and Visual Arts.

Proposals to change Houston ISD's magnet system often provoke strong

reactions from parents who send their children to magnet schools, along with advocates who argue the district is neglecting campuses without such programs.

Houston ISD board members have varying opinions about how drastically the district's magnet system should be overhauled. As a result, it is unclear which proposals will have enough support to pass.

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"I do believe very strongly that we need reform of our magnet program," Houston ISD Trustee Sue Deigaard said. "It's very long overdue. And it's going to be hard."

On the budget front, administrators said they are projecting the lower deficit for two reasons: optimism Houston ISD will



win a lawsuit that allows the district to keep about \$51 million, and assurances from the state that it will reduce Houston ISD's "recapture" payment in the wake of Hurricane Harvey. "Recapture" refers to the state's method of redistributing local property tax revenues from districts with relatively higher property values to those with lower values.

Houston ISD Superintendent Richard Carranza said the district's lawyers believe recent legal decisions foreshadow a victory in the lawsuit, which stems from a dispute over tax collections and homestead exemptions. Carranza also said Texas Education Agency leaders confirmed two weeks ago that the state will cover any losses in property tax revenues following Hurricane Harvey, which are projected to total about \$42 million.

"Today should actually be some good news as we think about our budget moving forward," Carranza said.

Deficit projections still are likely to change in the coming months, particularly as Harris County tax officials finalize property values. Houston ISD is expected to pass its budget in May or June. Board members enacted a 2017-18 budget that had a \$106 million deficit, using reserves to cover the hole.

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