

EDUCATION

Group ranks Central Texas' best and worst schools

Westlake High, Harmony Science Academy and Pillow Elementary are ranked No. 1 in Austin area.

By Laura Heinauer, Melissa Taboada
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A new ranking of Central Texas public schools shows that the Austin area is home to some of the best high schools in the state.

However, the study, to be released Monday by Houston-based Children at Risk, a nonprofit, nonpartisan group, also shows that the Austin area is home to some of the worst middle and high school campuses. Only 10 Austin-area elementary schools are among the top-tier elementary campuses statewide.

With Westlake High School ranked No. 1 in Central Texas and 14th statewide, it seems "Austin knows how to do the big, comprehensive high schools," said Bob Sanborn, president and chief executive of Children at Risk.

Compared with Dallas and Houston, Austin has fewer top-ranked schools because it has fewer stand-alone magnet campuses, Sanborn said. "You have a few schools that are truly good, but these aren't really the trophy schools that maybe a town like Austin should have."

The Austin school district is home to the worst middle school in the state - Pearce , with a rank of 1,676th - according to the study. Spokesman Andy Welch said the district is working to improve middle school student performance.

Children at Risk, which does research on and is an advocate for children's issues in Texas, has done the study for four years in Houston, but this is the first time it has done a ranking analysis for Central Texas. It is also the first time the group is giving a statewide comparison.

Unlike other school-quality reports - such as Newsweek's, which looks only at the number of students who take Advanced Placement tests, and the state's accountability system, which assigns ratings to schools based on test scores and dropout and attendance rates - the Children at Risk study looks at several factors.

Elementary and middle schools were judged on passing scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, attendance and class size, which Sanborn said was used as an indicator of engagement based on research that, particularly at the elementary school level, shows a correlation between the two.

High schools were ranked on those factors as well as graduation rates, the number of students taking the state's recommended high school coursework and college readiness standards - participation in Advanced Placement classes and scores on AP tests and the SAT and ACT college entrance exams.

Schools with insufficient data were not included in the rankings, including Austin's LBJ High School, the Liberal Arts and Science Academy and the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders.

Children at Risk also weighted results to account for the number of students from low-income families at each campus. Poverty is considered by researchers to be a significant determinant of academic success.

Edward Fuller, an education researcher at the University of Texas, reviewed the methodology of the Children at Risk study. Fuller said he thought judging schools by average college entrance exam scores was inappropriate because the averages decline as more students take the test. He also said the study should have accounted more for poverty.

"They should have used a more sophisticated methodology," Fuller said.

Caroline Holcombe, a project coordinator at Children at Risk, said controversy in Houston in previous reports prompted the group to reduce the importance given to poverty and to give it equal weight with the other variables.

"People became more concerned with the poverty issue than with what the study was trying to say," Holcombe said. "However, it's something we are continuing to evaluate, and we are very much open to improving our methods to better reflect the high impact poverty has on students."

Children at Risk, which formed in Houston in 1989 in an effort to improve the lives of children there, has faculty members from the Baylor College of Medicine, University of Houston, Texas Southern University and Rice University on its board of directors.

It is funded by various sources, including corporations such as Shell Oil Co., nonprofit foundations such as St. Luke's Episcopal Health Charities and the Ed Rachal Foundation, and individual contributions.

In coming years, Sanborn said, the group could also analyze which schools improve most and which are best for students learning English.

"The numbers don't lie," Sanborn said. "And I think as a parent, (these rankings) become a very good tool to demand that their public schools be better."

lheinauer@statesman.com; 445-3694

HIGH SCHOOLS

Westlake

Ranked No. 1 in Central Texas, No. 14 in the state

Only three students in Westlake's Class of 2009 didn't go to college, Director of Guidance and Career Counseling Jeff Pilchick said. One got a full-time job after graduation, one is pursuing a music career, and the other entered the military.

What's the secret behind that 98.6 percent college-going rate?

Westlake students, about 2 percent of whom come from low-income families, get one-on-one college advice with a "transition specialist" who helps identify goals, strengths, interests and limitations, Pilchick said. A computer program then rates a student's likelihood of getting into every college in the country based on previous Westlake student data.

"And that's just one example of what the machine of Westlake can do for a kid," Pilchick said.

Students say Westlake's course offerings and extracurricular activities — including theater, robotics, rugby and college-level organic chemistry and microbiology — help keep them engaged.

The Eanes school district requires newly hired teachers to earn master's degrees in teaching within eight years of joining the district. Teachers there have an average of 13.9 years of experience, compared with the statewide average of 11.9 years, state data show. And students say the commitment to students shows.

Shankar Nandakumar, a 16-year-old junior, recalled how a teacher once helped a friend who was struggling.

"The teacher looked up his address and called him and personally tutored him on that subject," Nandakumar said.

Principal Linda Rawlings said flexibility and collaboration among staff have created a student-centered environment.

"We want (students) to be the best they can be at what they want to do," Rawlings said. "Then, you create an environment where that can take place."

— Laura Heinauer

Georgetown

No. 10 in Central Texas , No. 85 in the state

This school is all about caring for one another and being inclusive, said Georgetown Principal Carlton Tucker, who has worn a bow tie to school each day for 35 years.

One way the campus demonstrates that mission is through the student-led "Aisle 1" closet, which provides food, clothing and school supplies to needy students and their families. Students stock the closet through donations and fundraising.

The closet came to be during a sociology class in which students discussed poverty and decided to make an impact locally.

Nearly one in three Georgetown High students are economically disadvantaged; about 100 of the

school's 2,228 students are homeless. Despite those challenges, the campus has been recognized as a Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education.

Tucker said he is trying to match every at-risk student with a mentor to help check up on grades and attendance. Tucker said his school's success is because of well-trained teachers and staff caring for kids by encouraging them to take Advanced Placement courses in anticipation of attending college or to pursue fulfilling careers.

The school is one of the few campuses in the nation that teach a flight simulation course that helps students earn a pilot's license or an aircraft mechanic's certification.

The school also has a forensics class, where police crime lab workers visit as guest speakers to explain how their jobs work.

Classroom doors are decorated with banners displaying the colleges from which teachers have graduated to encourage students to attend college.

The school also has roving counselors who set up shop in hallways and whose desks are on wheels.

"Rather than have the kids go to (us), we felt we should go to them," Tucker said.

— Melissa B. Taboada

MIDDLE SCHOOLS

Harmony Science Academy-Austin

No. 1 in Central Texas, No. 46 in the state

Tucked behind a busy strip mall in a worn, converted old church on East Rundberg Lane, Harmony is not the most aesthetically appealing middle school.

But this open-enrollment charter school is very attractive to families looking for an intense academic experience, school officials say.

Marketed as a "tuition-free college prep school" Harmony focuses on science, technology, engineering and math. Students who need it are required to attend tutoring twice a week after school and for three hours on Saturdays. Teachers visit student homes at least once but usually several times a semester, school officials said.

Harmony's 150 middle school students come from internationally and economically diverse families. About 47 percent are low-income.

The school gives a character education class and has a strict discipline point system that can lead to expulsion in extreme cases. If students don't do their homework, they fail.

Though there is no school football team, school administrators sign their students up for any science fair and academic UIL competition they can find.

"We don't plan to miss anything like that," said Halil Tas, a superintendent for Harmony schools in

Austin.

The Rundberg Lane campus is one of four in Austin funded by the Houston-based nonprofit Cosmos Foundation.

"I like the variety of ethnicities (and) religions cultures. We really get to learn from each other," said Hong Bui, a 13-year-old eighth-grade immigrant from Vietnam. "Also, the teachers are really good."

— Laura Heinauer

Canyon Vista

No. 2 in Central Texas, No. 143 in the state

Canyon Vista Principal B.J. Paris said she strives to make an impact on students from the first day of school.

"If you're a science teacher, you better blow something up," said the London native, jokingly. "If you're an art teacher, you better have paint all over you. If you're a French teacher, teach them the French kiss. I don't care — just make it exciting, so when kids go home on that first day, they say, 'Wow! I learned something new in every class today, and it was fun!' That sets the tone that says, 'We're about learning.' " (Paris clarified that the French kiss is a peck on each cheek.)

Teachers get the message. A science class was staged as if it had been vandalized. As students walked in, the teacher told them they were entering a crime scene. Students put on goggles and used scientific processes to document and photograph what they observed.

"We're a living organism," Paris tells her teachers. "We're either growing or we're dying. No status quo."

More than 45 percent of Canyon Vista's 1,138 students are minorities, and about 4 percent come from low-income families. Students hail from more than 20 countries. Paris said her Round Rock school district campus is a celebration and acknowledgement of diversity. The school has 29 clubs, including robotics and a competitive chess team that won a national championship in April.

Paris said mission statements are "typically long and boring," but she said Canyon Vista teachers and administrators condensed their values, goals and objectives into three words: Inspiring Future Leaders.

"We don't even talk about the TAKS test, because we have a vision of Canyon Vista as a world-class school, not just being good at taking the test," Paris said of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge of Skills, portions of which fifth- and eighth-grade students must pass to be promoted and high school students must pass to graduate.

— Melissa B. Taboada

KIPP Austin College Prep

No. 10 in Central Texas, No. 328 in the state

KIPP, which stands for Knowledge Is Power Program, currently serves about 360 students in fifth to eighth grades. About 92 percent of KIPP Austin's students are from low-income families.

The campus, an open-enrollment public charter school in East Austin, was the only school with a low-income population of more than 70 percent to break into the top 20 of its category in Central Texas.

The school's success is because of the relationships established among teachers and students, said Megan Uebelacker, KIPP Austin's director of development. "It's the commitment of every person here ... to every single child as a whole child."

Students are required to wear uniforms, take band, perform service projects and — here's a big difference — attend school from 7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. most days. Students also attend classes in summer and on Saturdays twice a month.

Teachers are on call until 9 p.m. in the evenings to help students with school work. KIPP teacher salaries are about 10 percent higher than the Austin school district's, KIPP officials said.

Jamileth Ortega, an eighth-grader who attended public school at Wooten Elementary School in Austin before enrolling at KIPP, said teachers "sit with you at lunch and help a lot if you have problems. ... If you fail, they make you work through it."

KIPP takes students on college scouting trips that start in fifth grade with a tour of Texas colleges and include colleges across the South and on the East Coast by eighth grade.

Ortega said it's something that sticks with her. "When you're here, they teach you about keeping your eyes on the bigger goal."

Her goal is to attend the University of California at Berkeley.

— Laura Heinauer

ELEMENTARY SCHOOLS

Pillow

No. 1 in Central Texas, No. 200 in the state

The students at Pillow are diverse, with 30 languages spoken among them. Nearly two-thirds are from low-income families. But despite those challenges, the school excels on state-mandated tests and has received multiple awards, including one by the National Center for Urban School Transformation and federal recognition as a Blue Ribbon School.

"I set our expectations high for all children," said Principal Tonya King. "We meet the child where we need to meet them and bring them to where they need to be. If you can build that relationship, if they know we care and are doing our part here, then they'll do their part."

King said the campus is tight-knit, with strong parental and teacher involvement. Each morning, Pillow students, teachers and a handful of parents gather in the cafeteria for a daily assembly. Each week kicks off with "College-Bound Mondays," in which students don the jerseys of their favorite college teams and parents or other guest speakers talk about the college they attended.

"It's just a family atmosphere," said Kimberly Davishines, who has a two children attending Pillow and is president of the PTA. Davishines said the morning assembly is "the equivalent of having dinner with

the family every night and sets the tone for the day."

When teachers come to the school, they tend to stay.

The average tenure at Pillow is more than 15 years, King said. And all the teachers tutor on their own time, she said.

"It's something they want to do because they believe in the students," King said. "They know and believe the kids can succeed."

— Melissa B. Taboada

Elm Grove

No. 6 in Central Texas, No. 320 in the state

On the first day of school, Principal Irma Flores-Brothers rolled out the red carpet — literally. And several dads, dressed up in suits, were there greet students at the front door.

"I want the message to be, 'We're here to give you the best,' " Flores-Brothers said. "I think it's important to let parents know that we want you and your children to feel welcome here. We want to set the tone that mediocre is not good enough. There is a sense of family here, a sense of teamwork and cohesiveness and very, very high standards."

The Hays school district campus is near several new neighborhoods in Buda, a booming suburb south of Austin. About 11 percent of students are from low-income families.

Flores-Brothers said parental involvement has been dampened by the economy but said the school is continually coming up with ways to keep families engaged. "We've had art exhibits, ice cream socials, poetry cafes, mentoring programs," she said.

Teachers, meanwhile, attribute much of the school's success to the care that has been taken in hiring the right staff. Carolyn Doherty, a kindergarten teacher, said 14 teachers were interviewed for a recent opening at the school.

Flores-Brothers said she tries to find staff with the right motivations.

"Kids are sharp. They know when you care," she said. "It all boils down to loving the children and really being here for the right reasons."

— Laura Heinauer

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