

Group ranks Central Texas' best and worst schools

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

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AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

Sunday, September 20, 2009

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