

Encino School

ENCINO

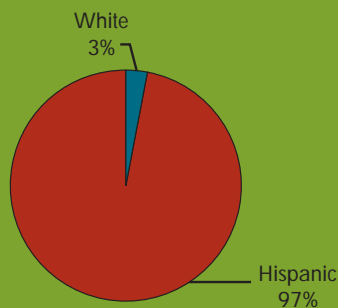
“It was like fighting City Hall.” But, when faced with what would be a daunting task for any community—keeping their only school open—Encino’s students, parents, teachers, administrators, and residents banded together and did just that. This small rural South Texas community, with a total population numbering fewer than 200, has had an elementary school since 1927. When Brooks County Independent School District (ISD) wanted to close Encino’s elementary school and bus students, adding as much as two hours daily commute time to even some kindergartners’ days, Encino residents said “no.” After a three-year, on-again off-again relationship with Brooks County ISD, during which the ISD closed, reopened, then again closed the small school, Encino School was granted a charter in 1998. Although many charter schools were formed to serve a special population or fulfill a specific academic emphasis, Encino School’s mission was simpler: “It was just a matter of having a school for the community,” says principal Robert Gonzales.

Student and School Characteristics

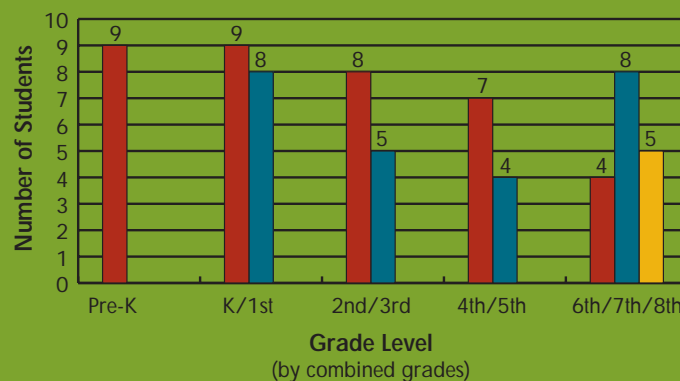
Encino School serves 67 students in grades pre-kindergarten through 8. Approximately 97 percent of the students are Hispanic, and 94 percent

are classified as economically disadvantaged. With only one special education student and just a handful of limited English proficiency students, the school is too small to have staff specifically designated to such special groups, but contracts for these services as needed. Using combined grades (i.e., 2nd and 3rd graders in the same classroom) allows only four teachers, one instructional aide, and one administrator to serve the needs of the school and its students. Teachers echo the principal’s comment about the school: “It’s a family thing.” With more than 30 years experience, the principal takes his responsibility as the head of the family seriously. When queried about his role, he replied, “Basically my duties are everything dealing with the school: transportation, maintenance, cafeteria, special ed director, counselor, assistant principal, principal. Anything that has to do with running this school.” Teachers agree, calling him “A jack of all trades and master of all,” and report that in addition to occasionally handling students’ relatively minor discipline problems, he changes light bulbs, mops, and cleans. The principal is just as complimentary of the teaching staff and is proud that all the teachers are certified. He believes that certification, along with the teachers’ classroom experience, gives Encino School an advantage over other charter schools because of the continuity such factors provide.

Student race/ethnicity: AEIS 2001–02



Student Enrollment in Encino School: AEIS 2001–02



Many decisions affecting the school are made collaboratively. For example, the school recently needed to replace both the school's secretary and bus driver. After initial recruitment efforts by the principal, candidates' resumes were forwarded to teachers and board members for review. With regard to professional development opportunities, teachers may attend workshops and instruction of their choice, but it is at their discretion. As the principal notes, teachers do not like to be out of the classroom, and as long as things in the classroom are proceeding as they should, there is no need to require that teachers attend training. Teachers do have regular staff development days during which they discuss, for example, curriculum alignment and standardized testing issues. However, because of the small staff size and limited number of students, teachers know each other and the students quite well and discuss issues when the need arises rather than waiting until designated times.



twos to 50, things like that where it's more structured." Encino School also eschews canned commercial programs purportedly assisting with standardized test preparation, again preferring to concentrate on "teaching the basics—the reading, the writing, the math." As teachers note, teaching these basics covers the essential elements proscribed by the TEA and adequately prepares their students for standardized assessments such as the newly mandated TAKS (Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills).

Educational Program

At the school's center, for teachers, administrator, and board members, are the children. Encino School's curriculum approach is quite simple, focusing on the basics—reading, writing, and math. The heart of the curriculum, however, may be language arts. Children practice oral reading, phonics, and vocabulary words every day and work on their handwriting each day. Although Encino School uses state-adopted textbooks, they distinguish their curricular approach from traditional school districts. Rather than relying on specialized academic centers or manipulatives, Encino School teachers prefer a more skills-based approach: "Here it's more...write me numbers 1 through 20, write me numbers counting by

The instructional approach at Encino School is somewhat unique because of the combined grade grouping. Although teachers generally prefer to actively teach to only one grade level at a time, while the other grade levels in the same classroom do seatwork, there is inevitable overlap in the instruction. As one teacher notes, an overhead transparency projected for one grade level will catch other students' attention. Teachers may try to incorporate the lower grade levels in the instruction if the students' capabilities permit; regardless, the students are at least somewhat exposed to the higher-level material. This atmosphere promotes collaborative learning, and students in upper grades are also allowed to more formally tutor their lower grade-level classmates, a practice teachers say is especially valuable given the classroom environ-

School Characteristics

Founded	1998
Grades	Pre-K to 8
Enrollment	67
Daily schedule	7:50 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Days of instruction	180
Student attendance rate	97.3%
Student dropout rate	0%

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

School Staffing

Number of teachers	4
Number of instructional aides	1
Student-teacher ratio	16.8 to 1
Beginning teachers	0%
Teachers with 1–5 years experience	50%
Teacher average years experience	12.0
Teacher turnover rate	20%
Teachers with no degree	0%
Teachers with advanced degrees	25%
Average teacher salary	\$34,575
Average campus administrator salary	\$47,077

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

ment. Both teachers and students benefit from the instructional continuity afforded when teachers have students in their class over multiple years. As the principal expressed, “[The teachers] are always working with [students] to work at their grade level because the following year the teacher’s going to have the same student and the student’s going to be in a different grade level.”

And, although standardized testing preparation is not the school’s instructional focus, teachers do take advantage of the combined grades to enhance test scores because it allows them to know their students’ academic strengths—and weaknesses—thoroughly. When one teacher’s student did not perform as well as expected on one TAAS subtest, she responded by providing him with extra practice materials in that section the following year. Thus, although the student was grade-level promoted, the classroom structure provided for the instructional continuity he needed to correct specific academic weaknesses.

Both students and teachers would like to see more technology incorporated into classroom learning, especially Internet connectivity, and more opportunities for extracurricular activities such as band and sports. Students, however, like the small school environment and appreciate their teachers’ efforts, frequently saying that “[the teachers] never give up on us.” Students’ satisfaction is, perhaps, mirrored by their good behavior. Discipline problems are few and far between, and teachers and administrators alike describe Encino School’s students as well mannered, polite, and “family oriented.” Teachers believe the time saved by not having to constantly wrestle with disciplinary prob-

lems, as some of them did when teaching in other schools, contributes substantially to the school’s learning environment. As one says, “All of our time is teaching...these kids are here to learn and they do.”

Parental Involvement

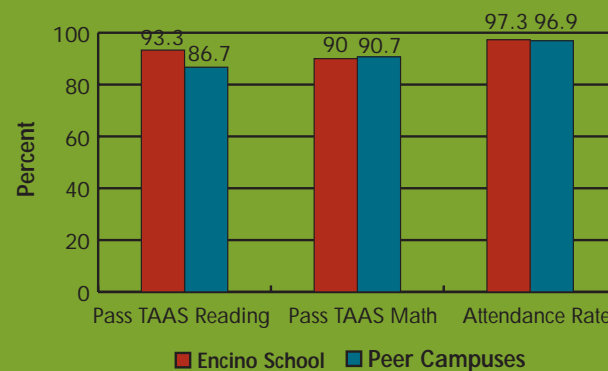
Parental involvement also contributes substantially to the school’s success story. A board member attributes one reason for success to the “interaction between the board and the community and the parents. It’s a very, very tight-knit community and that’s probably the greatest strength. The parents feel comfortable enough to...come and talk to anybody.” Parents also are involved at the campus level, and teachers and administrators say all they have to do is make a request and the parents are at the school, making decorations, photocopying materials, chaperoning trips. As one teacher says, “My parents are in and out all day long.” Although the community and school’s smallness undoubtedly facilitates communication between parents and teachers, teachers note the difference between parental involvement at Encino School and other schools where they have taught. Parents are not afraid to call teachers at home to ask how their child is doing in school and to ask what else they can do to help their child’s progress. Parents also are welcome in the classroom. One teacher, with 16 years experience, says, “What’s so amazing about this school is a parent can come in, knock on your door, wants to sit there. I love it.” Parents also make their expectations clear to their children. Another teacher, with more than 30 years experience, said the parents tell their children,

School Finance

Per-pupil expenditure	\$6,365
Per-pupil for instruction	\$2,995
Local revenue	4%
State revenue	83%
Federal revenue	12%

Source: Actual financial data for all funds, PEIMS 2001–02.

Comparison of Performance for Encino School and Peer Campuses: AEIS 2001–02



“You’re going to school because you’re going to go learn, and if they don’t, the parents will see to it that they come and learn.” Additionally, due probably in small part to Encino’s size and in large part to the affection community members feel for each other and the school, “surrogate” parents—Encino residents without elementary-aged children—provide additional support, such as cash and donations, to the school.

Governance

When asked about the strengths of Encino School’s governing board, a board member, also a retired nurse and community member for more than 55 years says, “Number one, our love for the school.” Board members regularly visit the school, have lunch with the children, or just peek into classrooms. She summarizes the board’s commitment to the school: “Of course most of [the children] know me or most of them know all of us...It makes you feel like you’re going to work like a dog to keep this school going.” Seven local ranchers, businesspeople, and other professionals comprise the board. All board members have deep community roots, and one, a board member since the school’s inception, grew up in Encino and attended elementary school in the same building now housing the school. He describes the board’s role as “[making] sure that the children have the education and the facilities and everything available to them for a good, rounded education.” An excellent relationship exists between board members and between the board and the school’s principal. The board oversees and monitors the school’s ongoing operation but does not try to “micromanage.” Their primary concern is providing Encino’s children with

the best education possible, and the principal says of the board, “Their number one priority is kids.”

Accomplishments

Encino School’s family atmosphere works. TAAS results for 2002 show that at least 80 percent of students in all grades tested (3rd through 8th) passed both the reading and math sections of the test, with 7th graders passing both sections at 100 percent. These high scores contributed to the school’s 2001–02 Exemplary designation. Additionally, with an attendance rate of more than 97 percent, Encino School was awarded TEA’s Gold Performance Acknowledgment (GPA) for attendance. The GPA system acknowledges high performance on several factors critical for academic success.

“The community was very adamant in keeping this school open,” states the principal. Although the community and the school are small, their vision for Encino’s schoolchildren is not:

Our goal is to provide a quality education...and make sure that when our kids leave here that they’re capable of handling the next phase of their education...A lot of our students...have been valedictorians at the high school level and it’s because of the home environment, it’s because of the school, it’s because they’re prepared to handle whatever it is that they have to handle at the high school level...How far do you want to go? How far you want to go is really up to you.

Campus Accountability Rating	
2000	Acceptable
2001	Recognized
2002	Exemplary

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

	TAAS Percent Passing					
	TAAS Reading			TAAS Math		
	2000	2001	2002	2000	2001	2002
Grade 3	--	66.7	80.0	--	60.0	80.0
Grade 4	100.0	--	100.0	60	--	83.3
Grade 5	88.9	87.8	92.3	55.6	94.7	97.0
Grade 6	100.0	83.3	--	85.7	100.0	--
Grade 7	83.3	83.3	100.0	100.0	83.3	100.0
Grade 8	100.0	--	80.0	83.3	--	80.0

Source: AEIS reports.