

Mainland Preparatory Academy

TEXAS CITY

“Mainland Prep is not for everyone—the teachers have to do more and so do the students, but they get more in return.” Mainland Preparatory Academy, located in Texas City, a suburb of Houston, was founded by a “group of friends” concerned about public education in Texas. After some research, and a look at the “horrible” test scores for minority children, Mainland Preparatory opened in August 1998 with 185 students. It was a community success from the beginning—the first day of registration saw a waiting line wrapped around the building, and the school has been granted permission to increase enrollment to 700 next year.

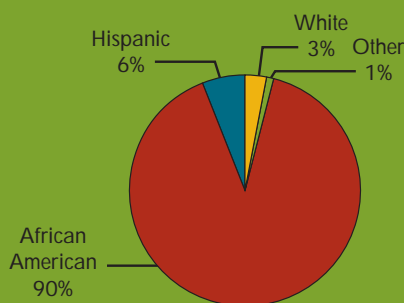
Mainland Preparatory Academy’s mission statement reflects both its commitment to academic excellence and community service: “To provide a quality education to its students through a structured program of basic skills acquisition. The program of activities is designed to prepare students to be productive, valuable members of society while building a strong foundation of knowledge and essential skills.”

Student and School Characteristics

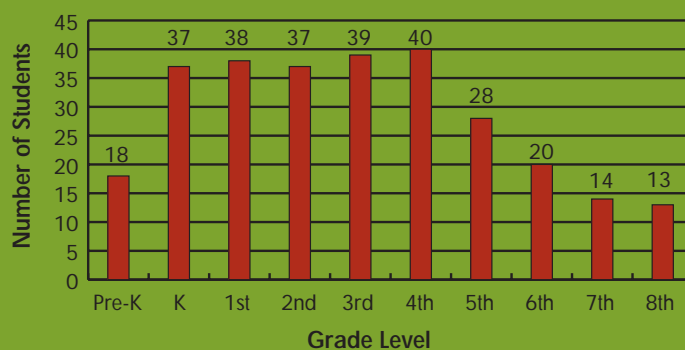
The 284 students at Mainland Preparatory Academy are predominantly African American (90 percent), with 6 percent Hispanic and 3 percent White; less than half the students (47 percent) are classified as economically disadvantaged. The attendance rate for the last two school years has topped 97 percent. Students describe the academic program as challenging, the teachers as caring, and the environment as family-like. They know that a lot is expected of them, both inside and outside of school. One focus of the school is community service, and students regularly donate their time to a wide range of area causes including food drives and as ushers at the Galveston Grand Opera House.

“Responsibility” and “accountability” are themes that both students and teachers hear often, especially from the school’s co-founders and administrators Diane Merchant and Wilma Green. Students, enrolled in grades pre-kindergarten through 8, must wear uniforms and are not allowed to wear tennis shoes. The administrators of the school believe that these rules place the emphasis on what is in the students’ minds, not on what is on the students’ bodies, thus leveling the

Student race/ethnicity: AEIS 2001–02



Student Enrollment in Mainland Preparatory Academy: AEIS 2001–02



playing field for all Mainland students. The school does not provide lunch or transportation (parents are required to drop off and pick up their children at school), preferring instead to use these funds to improve the school’s educational program and instructional quality. Nor does the school have an organized sports program—the entire emphasis is on academic excellence.

The school employs approximately 17 teachers, and has a teacher-to-student ratio of about 17 to 1. One comment is common to many Mainland teachers—“I get to *teach* here”—and teachers report that they are able to do whatever it takes to get the job done. As one teacher says, “I get to teach. The majority of the kids here want to learn...In public schools teachers tend to...go on with the ones who are keeping up. Here I feel we’re able to get that particular child and...find out what the problem is so we can deal with it. And it may not be...that they don’t want to [learn].” Students substantiate this point of view: says one student, “The teachers cared [at my other school], but if you didn’t get it they weren’t going to sit there after school and try to help you, but here they like to.” The school’s co-founders, who taught during Mainland’s first year to set an example for teachers, strongly encourage this level of commitment. Teachers are offered one-year contracts to facilitate the dismissal of “nonproductive” teachers; teachers must hold degrees and certification is strongly encouraged. More than half of Mainland’s teachers have children attending the school.

Teachers look to the school’s administrators for assistance and guidance. The administrators report serving as attendance clerks, “breakfast people,” and

human resource managers. Teachers concur, saying administrators do everything from “scrubbing floors to raising money to sweeping to helping teachers develop their teaching style.” In addition to after-school tutoring and substitute teaching, administrators make home visits. Visits are “not just for bad behavior,” because they also want parents to know that “we don’t just bring bad news, but that we bring good tidings, too.”

Educational Program

The academic approach at Mainland Preparatory Academy is based on a core knowledge curriculum. The acquisition of reading skills is paramount; next is the acquisition of math skills. Other curricular knowledge, such as science and social studies, is taught through the reading curriculum. The “teachable moment” begins in pre-kindergarten—administrators say, “Our pre-K children are reading by October, and it’s not harsh, it’s not cruel. It’s based on a very strong phonics approach.” One teacher describes the curriculum as “going beyond the basics” partnered with “high expectations.” As both teachers and administrators note, the school does not emphasize teaching to standardized tests such as the TAAS or the TAKS, instead saying, “We feel that passing the TAAS or the TAKS test should just be a logical consequence of having been taught the skills you need for everyday life.” Although Mainland students, parents, and teachers agree that the workload is heavy, one of the goals of the school is to teach students “nothing good comes easy.”

School Characteristics

Founded	1998
Grades	PK to 8
Enrollment	284
Daily schedule	8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
Days of instruction	185
Student attendance rate	97.7%
Student dropout rate	0%

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

School Staffing

Number of teachers	17.8
Number of instructional aides	1
Student-teacher ratio	16.9 to 1
Beginning teachers	11.9%
Teachers with 1–5 years experience	58.4%
Teacher average years experience	7.9
Teacher turnover rate	52.9%
Teachers with no degree	0%
Teachers with advanced degrees	11.9%
Average teacher salary	\$33,710
Average campus administrator salary	\$67,400

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

Students in upper grades are encouraged to take classes for which they can obtain high school credit, and many students leave Mainland Preparatory with credits in Algebra I, World Geography, and Spanish (all students are required to take Spanish in all grades). In general, high school finds Mainland Preparatory students well prepared for its rigors. As administrators say, “We’ve graduated two groups on to high school, and people have said they can tell a Mainland Prep student—they come prepared with an underlying body of knowledge, and they want to do well in school. That is one thing we really focus on—this is not a place where it’s okay to be mediocre.” Teachers use a variety of activities and projects to promote student learning, believing that hands-on activities facilitate student comprehension. According to students, activities have included a science project built around plant identification, and a math project on “how things work in the environment” that took them out-of-doors with cameras. One favorite recurring project for both students and the community is a “Living Museum.” Students research and role-play a historical person who “comes to life” when a participant rings their bell. Projects such as this, students say, provide them opportunities to learn about different cultures, backgrounds, and countries.

Students also enjoy a variety of extracurricular and special activities. Mainland Preparatory has an active student government, participates in National Junior Honor Society, and recently participated in University Interscholastic League choir for the first time. In addition to numerous trips to local museums and facilities such as the Galveston Grand

Opera House, students have taken field trips to Europe, Chicago, and the East Coast. Students also took a train trip to visit Lamar University in Beaumont, Texas, simply because “train travel was such an important part of history.” Administrators believe field trips give students a valuable “point of reference” that they would not otherwise have.

High student expectations also extend beyond the classroom. One teacher says that when observing her students at the Science Fair, she does more than just observe their project knowledge—she looks at their behavior because “We try to teach them...that when you’re in front of a group of people this is what you need to do and how you need to do it.” Students agree that presentation skills are an important part of their education. As one student says, “When we get up in front of people or our classmates it helps boost our confidence and helps us for later in life to be able to get up in front of a lot of people.” The curriculum is also designed to reflect students’ involvement in the community, and one teacher says, “I guess I’m preparing them for their life experiences...We’re teaching [students] how to interact with individuals...a simple hello, holding the door for somebody. Basic manners.” Each spring, sixth graders take an etiquette course, which administrators believe “[is] important in this fast food world.”

Parental Involvement

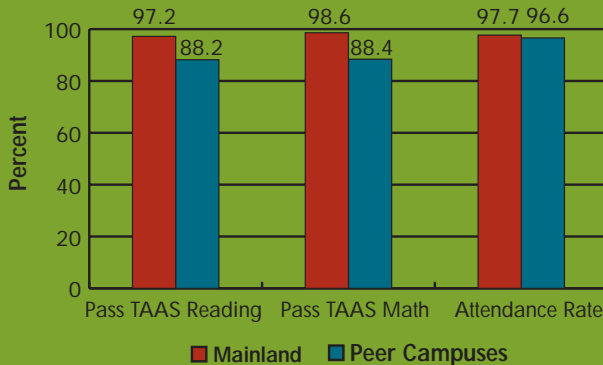
Administrators and teachers see a difference between parental involvement at Mainland Preparatory Academy and schools where they have

School Finance

Per-pupil expenditure	\$9,848
Per-pupil for instruction	\$3,669
Local revenue	75%
State revenue	23%
Federal revenue	1%

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

Comparison of Performance for Mainland Preparatory and Peer Campuses: AEIS 2001-02



previously served. One teacher reports that parents seem to care more and believes one important difference is that parents must drop off and pick up their children at school: “In the public school, kids walk home and you didn’t see the parents at all. You might try to contact them and can’t...but here you have to pick up your child...You see the parents.” According to the teacher, this kind of regular, informal contact helps parents see that coming to the school and talking to teachers is “not a scary situation.” In return, parents are asked to be involved in every aspect of the homework process and to accept that attending Mainland Preparatory is a lot of work for both students and parents. As one teacher says, “[Parents] must be involved in this school. There is no way a student will be able to really do well unless [they are].” Parents also are involved in other aspects of the school such as field trips, and so many parents attend special events (such as the Living Museum) that larger facilities must be rented to accommodate them. Students feel that the smallness of the school also contributes to a higher level of parental involvement.

Governance

A six-member board meets 10 times a year and includes a special education teacher, a college professor, a benefits manager, and a nurse. The school’s administrators are nonvoting members of the board and report that the board members have professions they can “lean on” in planning for school services. The board manages the fiscal responsibilities while expecting school administrators to make recommendations and “manage the day-to-day operations.”

Accomplishments

In just two years, Mainland Preparatory Academy has moved from Acceptable to Exemplary in the state’s accountability system. The move to Exemplary status is reflected by steady improvement in TAAS reading and math scores for all grade levels. Improvement is especially apparent as students move to grades 6, 7, and 8, with passing rates near 100 percent for these grades, suggesting a positive cumulative effect on academic success as a factor of time spent at Mainland Preparatory.

In addition to standardized test scores, another indicator of academic excellence is students’ success post-Mainland Preparatory. Alumnus regularly make honor role and are included in honor societies at their respective high schools and report back to Mainland teachers that high school work is a “piece of cake.” Teachers and administrators believe that Mainland students are well prepared, academically and personally, for high school and beyond and take great pride in their students’ successes. As school administrators say, “The children are the reason that we’re here, and we try not to lose sight of that. And no matter what’s going on, the other stuff can wait but that teachable moment, that reachable moment, can’t wait for a child.”

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	77.8	86.1	94.4	73.1	94.4	97.1
Grade 4	93.8	88.9	97.4	87.5	92.6	97.4
Grade 5	93.8	93.3	96.0	87.5	100.0	100.0
Grade 6	100.0	100.0	100.0	93.8	100.0	100.0
Grade 7	87.5	94.1	100.0	93.8	100.0	100.0
Grade 8	--	100.0	100.0	--	100.0	100.0

Source: AEIS reports.