

The North Hills School

IRVING

The North Hills School, an open-enrollment charter school located in the Las Colinas business community in Irving, is a college preparatory school with an international focus that serves elementary through high school students. The school's stated mission is "to provide an education that empowers students to reach their highest potential and inspires a love of learning." The school's long-term vision—that students enter competitive universities throughout the world and be successful in the workplace—is pursued through a rigorous curriculum, an environment that respects diversity, and the creation of traditions that illustrate the school's goals for the community. "Providing exposure to a variety of different cultures that reflect this country's immigrant population," according to Rosemary Perlmeter, the Director of Development, is "as much a part of who we are as our academic standards."

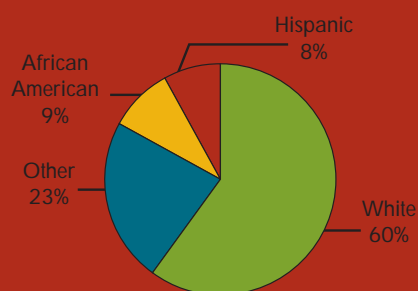
Since the school's founding in 1996, North Hills has grown from 218 students in grades 5 through 8 to 799 students across grades 1 through 12 in 2001–02. To accommodate the expansion, North Hills became the first charter school in the country to purchase property through the sale of tax-exempt bonds. After moving three times, the school made a final move in the fall of 2000, settling into a permanent home on approximately 5.7 acres of land in Las Colinas.

Student Characteristics

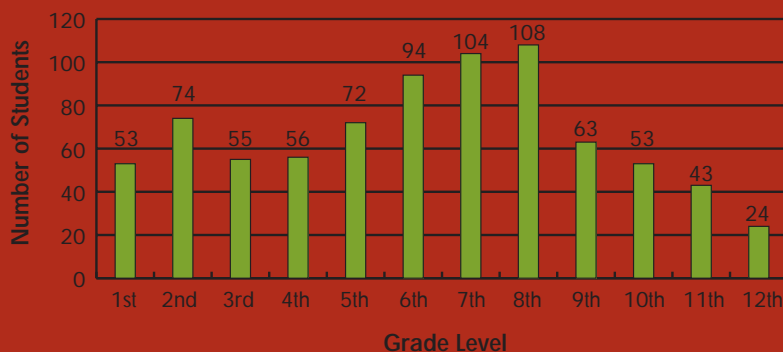
Most of The North Hills School's students are White (59.7 percent) or Asian (22.8 percent). Others are African American (9.0 percent), Hispanic (8.1 percent), and Native American (0.4 percent). A limited number of students are economically disadvantaged (1.6 percent) or limited English proficient (1.1 percent), and only a few are part of special education (1.8 percent) and bilingual/English as a second language (0.46 percent) programs. About a fourth of the students (25.4 percent) are served in gifted/talented programs.

Faculty and students are proud of the school's motivated, hard-working students. Students appreciate being surrounded by other students who "care about learning" and enjoy "peer pressure in the positive way." The focus on college preparatory instruction, along with clearly communicated student expectations, likely contributes to attracting committed students. Sandy Doerge, the Head of the School, states, "We explain to parents very clearly what we are trying to do." During fall open house, school leaders describe North Hills' vision, the advanced curriculum, homework expectations, and parent expectations. Thus, parents and students choose to be a part of North Hills with full knowledge that a high level of effort and achievement are expected.

Student race/ethnicity: AEIS 2001–02



Student Enrollment in The North Hills School: AEIS 2001–02



School Characteristics

The North Hills School serves students at three levels: lower school (grades 1 through 4), middle school (grades 5 through 8), and upper school (grades 9 through 12). Enrollment is highest in the middle grades.

The school calendar and daily schedule are similar to those for traditional public schools. Students follow an alternating block schedule and attend four 90-minute classes that meet every other day, for a total of eight classes per semester. The student attendance rate (96.6 percent) is higher than the state average (95.5 percent), and the school reports no dropouts.

Nearly all of North Hills' 65 teachers hold degrees (96.2 percent), and about a fourth have advanced degrees (25.6 percent). Many teachers (40.8 percent) are relatively new to teaching, with only one to five years experience. Classes are usually small, with an overall student-to-teacher ratio of 12 to 1, and class-size averages ranging between 14 and 18 students.

North Hills encourages each teacher to be "passionate about his/her subject and inspirational as an instructor of that subject." Prospective teachers complete a lengthy interview process and are observed as they teach a pre-assigned lesson plan. Teachers are very involved with students inside and outside regular classes and serve as student advisors, tutor before and after school, and participate in extra-curricular student activities. Students and administrators speak highly of the commitment, expertise, and availability of teachers before, during, and after school.

Teachers enjoy the clear mission, small class sizes, family atmosphere, motivated and well-behaved students, international perspective, flexibility in adapting curriculum, and support among teachers and



administrators. They cite low teacher salaries, limited resources such as technology, high expectations, and long hours as challenges. One teacher stated, "Here, I've worked a thousand times harder than I've worked anywhere." Another mentioned that a minimum of 10 hours a day is the norm. Staff members attribute teacher turnover (32 percent in 2001–02) mostly to low salaries and the demands of fulfilling the school mission.

Teachers and students are supported through the Head of School, a business administrator, a curriculum director, and three division directors. Middle and upper school division directors teach a course and serve as student advisors. Administrators conduct informal teacher evaluations during the year and formal evaluations at least once a year using an instrument developed by school staff members. Formal observations are coupled with a review of teacher files, lesson plans, student work, and the teacher's duties.

To support collaborative planning and decision making, every Wednesday is set aside for faculty-wide meetings, division meetings, or team meetings. Department leads are allotted an extra planning peri-

School Characteristics

Founded	1996
Grades	1 to 12
Enrollment	799
Daily schedule	8:15 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
Days of instruction	177
Student attendance rate	96.6%
Student dropout rate	0.0%

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

School Staffing

Number of teachers	65.5
Number of instructional aides	0.0
Student-teacher ratio	12.2 to 1
Beginning teachers	7.6%
Teachers with 1–5 years experience	40.8
Teacher average years experience	7.1
Teacher turnover rate	32.1%
Teachers with no degree	3.8%
Teachers with advanced degrees	25.6%
Average teacher salary	\$31,890
Average campus administrator salary	\$35,470
Average central administrator salary	\$60,533

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

od to observe and work with the teachers in the department. They also have a planning period designated for departmental planning and lesson plan development. Teachers are sent in groups to International Baccalaureate Organization (IBO) and Advanced Placement (AP) training.

Educational Program

Students are exposed to world languages and cultures through The North Hills School's college preparatory curriculum. During fall 2002, the school became an International Baccalaureate (IB) Applicant School and awaits full approval from the IBO. North Hills staff members developed their own curriculum based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), AP, and IBO objectives. The goal is to ensure that students "think creatively, reason critically, communicate effectively, and learn enthusiastically throughout life." Staff members align the curriculum vertically by determining what they want a graduating senior to know and work backwards to ensure specific skills are covered in each grade level.

In addition to core subjects, all students in grades 1 through 12 take French or Spanish. Also, students can participate in drama, music, and art. North Hills' graduation requirements are rigorous and include four years of English, mathematics, science, social studies, and foreign language along with a community service requirement. Pre-AP and AP courses are offered in the five academic areas. Middle school students take a study skills course and an information technology course. Upper school students participate in a course that emphasizes critical thinking of political and economic systems around the world and an outdoor

leadership course designed to develop leadership and cooperative skills through outdoor challenges.

North Hills emphasizes education outside of the classroom through its community service and travel programs. Community service projects allow students to "learn what it means to give back to others." To expose students to new cultures and places, North Hills sponsors travel programs for middle and upper school students to places in the United States and throughout the world.

Students are involved in numerous extracurricular activities and sports teams. Examples include Student Council, National Honor Society, Chess Club, Thespians, and Creative Writing Club. In addition, students participate in basketball, volleyball, soccer, tennis, golf, cheerleading, and dance. In keeping with the school's international focus, the school hosts an "international week" each fall where time is devoted to studying issues relevant to international cultures, issues, and events.

Discipline problems are not an issue at North Hills. Educators attribute the positive environment to the small school size that allows teachers to know all of the students and to positive peer pressure. As one teacher said, "We expect them to behave when they walk in the door." Students cherish the "safe environment" and view North Hills as one of the safest [schools] in the area."

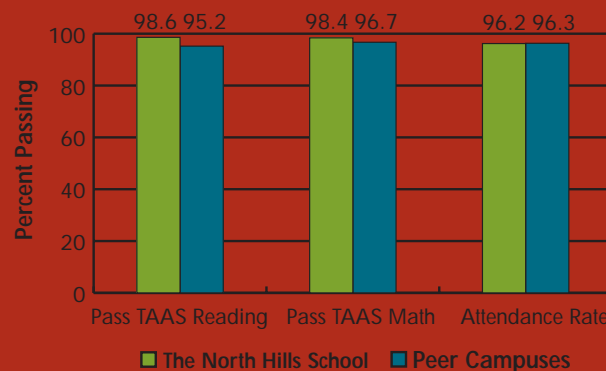
Communicating with parents about student progress is important at North Hills. Teachers frequently contact parents by e-mail and telephone and conduct parent-teacher conferences twice each year. Middle and upper school students receive guidance through the advisory program. In addition, administrators and counselors identify

School Finance

Per-pupil expenditure	\$5,506
Per-pupil for instruction	\$3,946
Local revenue	10%
State revenue	89%
Federal revenue	1%

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

Comparison of Performance for The North Hills School and Peer Campuses: AEIS 2001-02



students failing one or more classes and meet with the students and parents to discuss the student’s needs.

Student progress is monitored through standardized tests, writing portfolios, and teacher-specific measures. Standardized tests include the state assessments, Stanford Achievement Test, and AP exams. Students identified for TAAS remediation are required to attend tutorials before and after school. Other measures include homework, quizzes, tests, projects/labs, and writing assignments with scoring rubrics.

Parental Involvement

Educators characterize parent involvement as “very high” and “amazing.” Parents are encouraged to volunteer at the school, and teachers and students report that many go far beyond what would be expected. Parents make copies, work in the library, chaperone dances, direct carpools, substitute, assist in the parking lots, help students with the college application process, and provide supplies and equipment.

Governance

The North Hills School has a dual board structure that includes a Founders Board and an Operating Board. The Founders Board, comprised of seven school founders, is responsible for strategic planning, the budget, real estate issues, legal issues, and approval of the Head of School. They also oversee the Operating Board’s major decisions, review the results of parent and staff surveys, and are developing a governance guide for charters schools. The Operating Board, with six members serving two-year terms, focuses on general policy and the development of job positions. The board also evaluates the Head of School and the

Director of Development. Each year, between one and three founders serve on the Operating Board. Administrators and board members believe the governing board members’ varied backgrounds, such as finance, real estate, law, marketing, human resources, and education, is a key strength. Tenacity, respect, honesty, and commitment to the vision are cited as Founding Board assets. One founder stated: “One of the strengths of the school from the beginning is that they’ve always tapped into people in the community who have professional skills.”

Accomplishments

The North Hills School has received Exemplary ratings for the past three years due to high passing rates on the TAAS, excellent attendance, and having no dropouts. TAAS passing rates for reading and math are consistently high, with close to 100 percent of students passing. Although not included in the school’s rating, 2002 passing rates are exceptionally high for the Biology (100 percent) and English II (98.1 percent) end-of-course exams. North Hills also received three Gold Performance Acknowledgements in 2001–02 for high student attendance (96.6 percent), and a high percentage of students enrolled in advanced courses (46.4 percent) and scoring at or above the state criterion on AP/IB tests (61.1 percent).

Educators and students believe the school’s focus on college preparatory instruction, clearly communicated expectations, dedicated teachers, involved parents, and small size positively affect student achievement. Students praise the school’s academic and social effect on their lives. One upper school student stated: “What I appreciate most about this school is how it’s prepared me for life.”

Campus Accountability Rating

1999	Recognized
2000	Exemplary
2001	Exemplary
2002	Exemplary

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

TAAS Percent Passing

	TAAS Reading			TAAS Math		
	2000	2001	2002	2000	2001	2002
Grade 3	N/A	95.3	98.0	N/A	95.3	95.8
Grade 4	N/A	98.1	94.0	N/A	96.2	98.0
Grade 5	95.7	98.6	98.6	95.7	98.7	100.0
Grade 6	98.8	93.8	98.9	100.0	96.9	100.0
Grade 7	93.3	98.0	99.0	92.0	97.0	97.0
Grade 8	97.5	97.6	100.0	97.5	96.3	99.0
Grade 10	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	98.0

Source: AEIS reports.