

YES College Preparatory School

HOUSTON

Youth Engaged in Service (YES) College Preparatory School, an open-enrollment charter school for middle and high school students, focuses unwaveringly on its declared mission—"to provide a rigorous academic program that prepares students for success in a four-year college or university." The school embodies a fundamental belief that, given appropriate opportunities, all students, regardless of race or socioeconomic background can succeed academically. At YES College Prep, students must be accepted to a four-year college or university to graduate—thus, faculty, parents, and students are committed to do "whatever it takes" to help students succeed in preparatory school, the collegiate environment, and life beyond. Educational opportunity, according to Director Christopher Barbic, not only enables YES College Prep students to "take care of themselves emotionally and financially" but also instills "a sense of obligation to go back and make their neighborhoods better."

YES College Prep has evolved over time. The school originated in 1995 as a special program within a Houston Independent School District school. In 1998, following three academically successful years, the school became a charter school in partnership with KIPP Academy. YES College Prep received a separate open-enrollment charter

in 2000, and the school currently operates on a 25-acre site in southeast Houston. A second campus will open soon on the north side of the city to extend services to other economically disadvantaged children who want to go to college but lack access to high-quality private or public schooling.

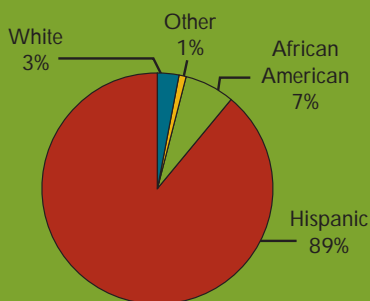
Student Characteristics

YES College Prep enrolled 423 students from across Houston in grades 6 to 12 during the 2001–02 school year. Students are predominantly Hispanic (88.9 percent), with only small percentages African American (7.3 percent) and White (2.6 percent). More than half of students (54.6 percent) are economically disadvantaged.² A limited number of students are served in special education (4.0 percent) or bilingual/English as a second language (2.6 percent) programs facilitated by school personnel or through contractual arrangements.

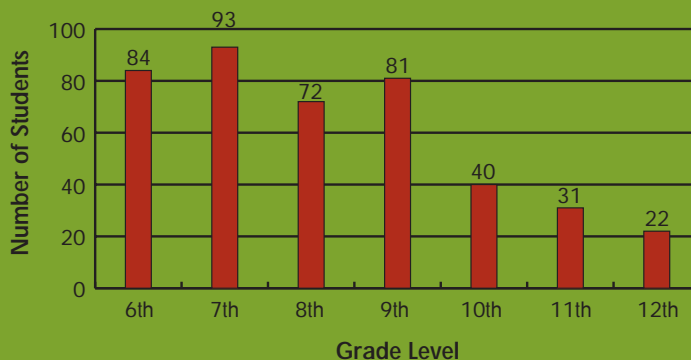
Students, according to faculty, are dedicated and willing to work beyond the minimum to achieve

²The director reports that AEIS data are inaccurate; 78 percent of students are economically disadvantaged.

Student race/ethnicity: AEIS 2001–02



Student Enrollment in YES College Preparatory School: AEIS 2001–02



academic goals. A contributing factor may be an enrollment process involving the completion of a contract between teachers and the student and parent. During home visits to every incoming 6th and 9th graders' homes, two staff members spend about 45 minutes reviewing teacher, parent, and student commitments regarding attendance, conduct, and academic work. All parties sign contracts committing to do "whatever it takes" to ensure student success. "Students want to attend YES, and by making the choice," one teacher explained, "they know what is expected from them."



School Characteristics

YES College Prep serves students across seven grade levels from middle to high school. The developmental grade span supports a vertically aligned curriculum, with prerequisite skills addressed in lower grades.

Students at YES College Prep agree to spend more time in school compared to their traditional public school peers. Students have a longer school day (7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m.), attend Saturday school twice each month, and participate in a three-week summer school. Students also wear uniforms to "reduce competition between students based on the style and expense of their clothing." Despite stringent commitments and time expectations, the student attendance rate is near perfect (97.9 percent), and there are no reported student dropouts.

YES College Prep employs approximately 30 teachers. Although the student-to-teacher ratio is 14 to 1, classes may have as many as 25 students. In hiring teachers, the school looks for three qualities: genuine intel-

ligence, knowledge of content area and passion for it, and ability to connect with kids. Teacher recruitment efforts include a spring open house to introduce potential teacher candidates to the school vision. Subsequently, teacher applicants visit classrooms and teach a sample lesson observed by school leaders. Teachers are typically young and energetic, with almost three-fourths having only one to five years experience. Almost all teachers have degrees (86.7 percent) and some have advanced degrees (16.6 percent); full-time teachers are required to hold degrees. Once hired, teachers are expected to participate yearly in 40 hours of professional development. Each individual self-selects training opportunities that align with their content-area assignment, instructional needs, and interests.

Teachers value professional freedom, independence, and flexibility allowed in the charter school environment. Educators are challenged, however, by extensive time commitments (days as long as 7:20 a.m. to 6:00 p.m.) that sometimes make it difficult to balance professional and personal lives. In addition, standards are high. "We have such high expectations," said a teacher, "and it's not only high for the students, it's obviously high for teachers." Teachers, who are expected to assume responsibility for student learn-

School Characteristics

Grades	6 to 12
Enrollment	423
Daily schedule	7:30 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Saturday (two per month)	9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Summer (three weeks)	9:30 a.m. to 1 p.m.
Days of instruction	215
Student attendance rate	97.9%
Student dropout rate	0%

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

School Staffing

Number of teachers	30.1
Number of instructional aides	0
Student-teacher ratio	14 to 1
Beginning teachers	6.6%
Teachers with 1-5 years experience	73.4%
Teacher average years experience	4.5
Teacher turnover rate	43.9%
Teachers with no degree	13.3%
Teachers with advanced degrees	16.6%
Average teacher salary	\$37,655
Average central administrator salary	\$66,000

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

ing, receive a cell phone to facilitate student and parent access to assistance with homework or other issues. The school also has a formal teacher appraisal process, with the assistant director and department chairs conducting observations and reviewing instructional materials; students also complete teacher evaluations. Evaluations, according to the director, ensure “that teachers aren’t just getting up in front of kids and talking 45 minutes every day; that teachers are using different ways to get the information across to kids.” Although the teacher turnover rate is high (43.9 percent), staff say teachers most often leave to pursue graduate degrees or make a career change.

Administrators, whose position responsibilities advance the schools’ mission, support faculty and students in several ways. The school director, a Teach for America alumnus, provides oversight for teachers, an assistant director who serves as the instructional leader, dean of students who handles discipline, college counselor, director of development (fund raiser), athletic director, after-school coordinator, business manager, and other staff. “One of the things we agreed on,” said the director, “was that everyone here would teach.” Thus, students benefit not only from administrators’ leadership but also shared expertise in courses such as study skills, speech and debate, dual-credit psychology, and Advanced Placement American Literature.

Faculty comment frequently on open communication between administration and staff that creates a “level of trust” and “team effort.” Communication and collaboration also occurs daily among teachers. As one teacher explained, “It’s constant com-

munication, whether it’s catching someone in the hall or a formal meeting or e-mail.” Ongoing contact heightens staff awareness of students’ needs: “We all have our eyes on every single kid and communicate on an individual level about the children,” one teacher declared.

A number of organizational structures support collaborative planning and decision making. School dismisses early each Thursday to facilitate whole-staff meetings. In addition, teachers are aligned both horizontally and vertically. Grade-level chairs facilitate weekly meetings, which teachers say are useful to align schedules, discuss student academic and discipline issues, and determine courses of action. Department chairs (e.g., for English, science, math) support vertical alignment across grades and regular meetings provide a forum to address curricular, instructional, and assessment issues. School-improvement committees allow teachers to voice opinions on topics, discuss problems, and propose solutions.

Educational Program

At YES College Prep, classes meet 45 minutes per day, except for math and English, which are double-blocked and meet for 90 minutes. The school day consists of eight class periods, followed by 60 minutes for extracurricular clubs or sports. The school receives about half its funds from local and federal sources and invests approximately \$3,310 per pupil for instruction.

The school implements a rigorous academic curriculum, with all students following similar aca-

School Finance

Per-pupil expenditure	\$8,886
Per-pupil for instruction	\$3,310
Local revenue	14%
State revenue	56%
Federal revenue	30%

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

demographic plans. Classes at the middle-school level stress prerequisite knowledge and skills that build a strong foundation for higher order analysis and synthesis at the high-school level. The curriculum, developed by staff, is guided by the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and content-area standards, and draws on resources such as textbooks, curricular guides from other districts, Advanced Placement course outlines, and E.D. Hirsch's Core Knowledge Sequence. Staff used a vision of successful college performance to "work backwards" to identify what students need to know as early as middle school, explained the director. Recognizing the importance of algebra as a gateway to higher education, students take pre-algebra in 6th grade, first-semester Algebra I in 7th grade, and second-semester Algebra I in 8th grade. The school also stresses the development of reading comprehension and writing to support content-area learning for many students who enter the school performing below grade-level expectations.

Teachers value their freedom to use textbooks selectively for lessons, in contrast to past experiences with chapter-coverage requirements in traditional schools. Although the curriculum serves as a "road map," said one administrator, each teacher is given freedom to "see the big picture, see where the kids need to be at certain points...and figure out how they need to get them there." Teachers cite a number of instructional strategies they are using to facilitate student learning: questions promoting analytical thinking, visual aids (charts, graphs, maps), current events (CNN articles), self-selection of writing topics, notetaking, content-related field trips, visualization, role playing, and lab projects in pairs or small groups. Every classroom has at least one computer and Internet drop, and there is one computer lab with 35 computers. The school has

recently received two mobile wireless laptop carts with 30 laptops each that can be used in any classroom. Although most teachers are just beginning to think about integrating technology into the curriculum, several are using the Internet to find instructional activities. Teachers give a lot of homework, but it does not appear to be a major problem for students. One student remarked, "They give us lots of homework, but...there's study halls in school. They give people time to work on their homework."

A unique part of YES College Prep is the effort invested in exposing students to new experiences. Teachers are encouraged to find ways to apply what students are learning to the real world, and community service projects are integrated into the academic curriculum. One teacher, for example, described a research project in which students collected statistics at a dangerous intersection near the campus then wrote a persuasive letter to the city that resulted in the installation of a stoplight. Students also are required to participate in an extracurricular club or sport. Students remarked on their involvement in activities such as cooking club, SEEDS (Schlumberger Excellence in Educational Development), Latin percussion club, photography, sculpture, Student Council, and peer mentoring and tutoring. One student, describing her experience in a service club, said: "I was in it for two years and I love it because you go to the nursing homes and they just need care and love, and I thought it was really nice that we do that." Students with good grades and attendance have opportunities to participate in Spring Trips. YES College Prep, according to the director, spends about \$250,000 each year in providing weeklong spring trips to different parts of the country to visit colleges and see historical places (e.g., Boston, Washington D.C., Los Angeles).

"YES College Preparatory School offers inner-city students the opportunity to experience a culture of achievement that prepares them for success both in and out of the classroom."

Students are held responsible and accountable for behavior, and teachers say consistently administered discipline is one of the keys to school success. In the middle school, a clipboard used to document rule infractions accompanies home-room groups from teacher to teacher. “It’s another way to keep track of everybody,” said one teacher. “By sixth period, [if] I can see that they’ve gotten into trouble in every single other class, then that puts it into context for me.” The school also uses discipline methods that allow students to remain in class and receive instruction rather than being expelled or suspended. Students with excessive infractions within a week are put “on the porch,” which places them symbolically and literally outside the community. Students have to stand for classes, cannot talk to anyone, and must write letters of apology to gain reentry. Positive student peer pressure, according to teachers, creates a productive learning environment. “There is a lot of discipline and it’s a strict place, but it’s not a negative place,” said a focus group of teachers. “The kids live up to expectations, and peer pressure works in a positive way.”

Progress toward student achievement goals is monitored in both formal and informal ways. Besides the state-required standardized assessments, 6th- and 9th-grade students complete the Stanford 9, a national norm-referenced standardized test. In addition, students complete a variety of assessments, including midterms and final exams and other learning measures (e.g., unit tests, quizzes, writing portfolios with scoring rubrics, lab reports). Teachers are confident in their students’ ability to perform on state-mandated tests. As for test preparation, teachers declare, “We don’t cut out class

time to do that.” “They are ready for it. They just need some sample testing to see what’s going on, what kind of test it’s going to be.”

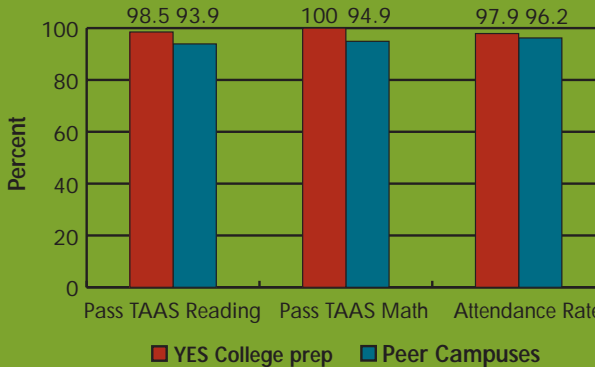
Parental Involvement

Staff more often describe parents as being “committed” to providing academic support for their children rather than being extensively “involved” in the school. “Parents can’t always be here or contribute the time,” explained an administrator, “but they are committed to the program and they are doing what they need to do at home to check their student’s homework, to call if they have questions, to pick up their child if they have to stay after school.” The school, however, does have an active Parent Advisory Association that assists with fundraising, sponsors school events, and provides volunteers for various school activities. “I think a lot of parents seek us out,” explained an administrator, because like a private school, “We’re relatively safe. We’re very structured. We’re relatively strict. We give a lot of homework. We expect a lot, but yet, it’s free.”

Governance

YES College Prep is governed by a 20-member Board of Trustees. The board’s twofold purpose is to provide oversight for the nonprofit organization and to serve as the board of education for the school. Board members, who receive no compensation, represent a mix of business executives, attorneys, accountants, community leaders, and parents. As a new organization, the school recruit-

Comparison of Performance for YES College Preparatory School and Peer Campuses: AEIS 2001–02



ed individuals “who cared a lot about the school, were willing to do some work for the school, and had some ability to raise money or help raise money,” explained the director. Board members’ main responsibilities include helping with fundraising, reviewing monthly financial statements to ensure fiscal responsibility, and raising awareness in the community about the school. Although board members, according to the director, do not get involved in the day-to-day management of the school, many lend expertise—business, accounting, law, real estate—needed by the school.

Accomplishments

Without a doubt, YES College Preparatory School has achieved outstanding academic results on a variety of measures. TAAS passing rates for reading and mathematics are consistently near 100 percent across all grade levels and exceed passing rates for traditional peer campuses. End-of-course passing rates (Algebra I, Biology, English II, and U.S. History) have generally increased over time, and passing rates in 2002, between 89 and 97 percent, were typically 15 or more percentage points higher than state averages. Moreover, 100 percent of graduates complete the more rigorous Recommended High School Program.

Although YES College Prep has consistently received Exemplary accountability ratings from the Texas Education Agency, an even more important indicator of school success, according to the director, is the rate at which the school sends students to higher education. In the previous school year, 100 percent of graduates were accepted to and are attending four-year colleges or universities. The school is especially

proud of the quality of the schools students entered and the amount of financial aid that they have been able to earn. As the director explained, “To us, that’s way more important than the TAAS scores and the Exemplary ratings...to know that those kids are in great colleges, doing well, and serving as great role models to the kids at this school and to kids in the neighborhood.”

Administrators, teachers, and students identified several features of the school that help explain student achievement. Foremost, the focus on college preparation creates unity of purpose and provides a clear and measurable end goal. Staff quality is also key—“People feel like there’s a purpose to working here and are energized by that, and they really care about the kind of instruction that they’re providing on a day-to-day basis,” said an administrator. Students also think teachers matter: “The fact that the teachers will interact with the students and will not only teach just by teaching the whole class, but when you need help, you don’t have to be afraid of raising your hand.” Incentives to learn also appear to keep students moving toward goals. One student explained it this way: “If you really, really want to make something of yourself and can image yourself taking it step-by-step, it makes goals seem achievable.” Finally, one teacher in a focus group articulated the importance of commitment expressed by many: “We all want this place to succeed. Everybody’s really committed to the success.”

Campus Accountability Rating

1999	Exemplary
2000	Exemplary
2001	Not rated*
2002	Exemplary

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

*New open-enrollment charter.

TAAS Percent Passing

	TAAS Reading			TAAS Math		
	2000	2001	2002	2000	2001	2002
Grade 6	100.0	98.7	98.7	100.0	100.0	100.0
Grade 7	97.8	100.0	96.6	98.9	100.0	100.0
Grade 8	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Grade 10	96.9	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0

Source: AEIS reports.