

# Profiles

*of* HIGH-PERFORMING

TEXAS OPEN-ENROLLMENT

## Charter Schools

Texas Center for Educational Research



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# Profiles of High-Performing

## TEXAS OPEN-ENROLLMENT CHARTER SCHOOLS

Over the past eight years, Texas charter schools have developed within the context of the growth of the charter school movement throughout the United States. Since Minnesota enacted the first charter legislation in 1991, 39 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico have enacted charter school laws. According to the Center for Educational Reform, approximately 2,700 charter schools served over 684,000 students nationwide during the 2002–03 school year. The states with the most charter schools in operation are Arizona (464), California (428), Florida (227), Michigan (196), and Texas (221).<sup>1</sup>

Texas passed legislation in 1995 establishing charter schools. In that session, the 78th Legislature provided for the creation of 20 open-enrollment charter schools (TEC §§ 12.101-120). Open-enrollment charter schools are public schools that are substantially released from state education regulations and exist separate and apart from local independent school districts. They may be sponsored by an institution of higher education (public or private), a nonprofit organization as set out in the Internal Revenue Code (501(c)(3)), or a governmental entity. In 1997, the Legislature provided for an additional 100 open-enrollment charter schools and an unlimited number of open-enrollment charter schools serving students at risk of failure or dropping out of school (75 Percent Rule charter schools). The Legislature made further revisions to the education code governing

charter schools in 2001. These provisions eliminated the 75 Percent Rule designation, capped the number of charter schools the State Board of Education may grant at 215, and allowed for an unlimited number of specialized charter schools sponsored by public senior colleges and universities.

### Characteristics of Charter Schools and Students

As a result of the enabling legislation, the number of Texas charter schools has increased dramatically. During the 1996–97 school year, only 17 open-enrollment charter schools operated in Texas. By the 2001–02 school year, a total of 180 charter schools were in operation for the majority of the year. At the same time, the number of students enrolled in charter schools also has increased significantly, from 2,498 to 46,304 across six school years. The total charter school student enrollment, however, represents only a small proportion of the approximately 4.1 million public school students in Texas.

Compared to Texas traditional public schools, charter school students are more racially/ethnically diverse. Charter schools have a greater share of African American students (40.1 percent versus 14.4), substantially less White students (20.4 percent versus 40.9), and comparable proportions of Hispanic students (37.9 percent versus 41.7). Charter schools in Texas also enroll a somewhat higher percentage of economically disadvantaged students (57.6 percent versus 50.5) than traditional public schools.

<sup>1</sup>Center for Education Reform (2003). About charter schools. [www.edreform.com](http://www.edreform.com).

### Number of Texas Open-Enrollment Charter Schools and Students Served

Total Charter School Year	Total Charter Schools in Operation	Number of Campuses in Operation	Average Students Enrolled	Campus Enrollment
1996–97	17	17	2,498	147
1997–98	19	19	4,135	216
1998–99	89	99	17,616	198
1999–00	146	174	25,687	156
2000–01	160	200	37,696	188
2001–02	180	241	46,304	192

Source: Open-enrollment evaluation reports, years one to six ([www.tcer.org](http://www.tcer.org))

## Charter School Accountability

As the charter school movement continues to grow, student achievement is a pivotal concern in Texas and nationally. In general, states rarely exempt charter schools from state student assessments, and most states hold charter schools to the same accountability standards (based on student outcome measures) as traditional public schools.

In Texas, charter schools are included in the public school accountability system. Mandated by the 1993 Texas Legislature, the system relies on the state's student-level information system (Public Education Information Management System—PEIMS) and criterion-referenced assessment (Texas Assessment of Academic Skills—TAAS) to accredit districts and rate schools. Through 2002, Texas districts and campuses, including charter schools, have received annual accountability ratings based primarily on TAAS performance and dropout rates. Charter schools in the first year of operation are not rated unless requested; however, newly opened charter campuses administered by operating charter schools receive ratings. Districts and campuses may be rated under one of two systems: the *standard accountability system* or the *alternative education accountability system*.

In 2002, performance standards for each of the four standard accountability system ratings categories listed below had to be met by each of five student groups: all students, African American, Hispanic, White, and economically disadvantaged.

- **Exemplary**—90% or more passing TAAS, dropout rate of 1% or less
- **Recognized**—80% or more passing TAAS, dropout rate of 2.5% or less
- **Acceptable**—55% or more passing TAAS (50% or more on social studies), dropout rate of 5.0% or less

- **Low-Performing**—less than 55% passing TAAS, (less than 50% on social studies), dropout rate of more than 5.0%

In addition to the ratings described above, a campus serving primarily at-risk students may apply to be rated under the alternative education accountability system procedures. Alternative education ratings use the following three categories, and performance standards must be met for all five student groups.

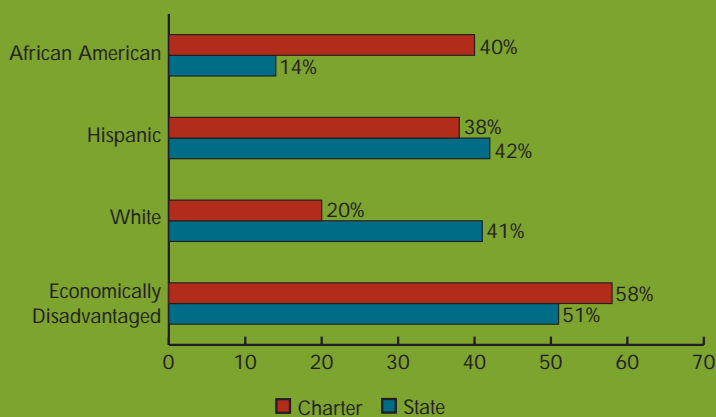
- **Commended**—30% or more passing TAAS, 85% increasing Texas Learning Index (TLI) scores, dropout rate of 6% or less, attendance rate of 94% or higher
- **Acceptable**—30% or more passing TAAS, dropout rate of 10% or less, attendance rate of 80% or higher
- **Needs Peer Review**—less than 30% passing TAAS, dropout rate of more than 10%

Across six school years, Texas traditional public schools have consistently outperformed charter schools on both standard and alternative education accountability ratings. Still, noteworthy findings for the past three school years reveal steady progress by charter schools toward higher performance levels. In 2002, for example, the percentages of charter school campuses rated as Exemplary (standard system) and Commended or Acceptable (alternative education system) rose markedly. Unfortunately, the percentages of charter schools rated as Low-Performing or Needs Peer Review remained unacceptably high in comparison to traditional public schools.

## Purpose of Charter School Profiles

*Profiles of High-Performing Texas Open-Enrollment Charter Schools* was funded through a federal Public Charter School Dissemination Grant received by Rapoport Academy in 2001. The grant program aims “to

Demographic Comparisons for Texas Charter Schools and Traditional Public Schools: AEIS 2001–02



increase national understanding of the charter school model by supporting activities that help open new public schools (including public charter schools) or share the lessons learned by charter schools with other public schools” (TEA Request for Application, 701-03-009). Although Rapoport Academy’s dissemination grant includes several activities, one piece centers on documenting successful practices of Texas charter schools that enable students to learn challenging state content standards and achieve state performance standards, and the dissemination of that information to interested educators. To that end, Rapoport Academy contracted with the Texas Center for Educational Research, an independent, nonprofit research organization, to undertake a study of the characteristics of successful charter schools in Texas.

### Study Approach and Method

Researchers conducted intensive case studies to provide an in-depth look at a select group of charter schools. The purpose was to explore the different types of innovations and best practices successful charter schools employ—charter schools rated as Exemplary (standard accountability system) or Commended (alternative education accountability system)—to meet the specific needs of their students. Researchers selected sites through a review of Texas accountability system ratings awarded to open-enrollment charter campuses in 2002 and the previous two school years. To ensure stability, charter schools had to have been in operation for at least three school years. Sites selected for visits included eight campuses rated as Exemplary and two rated as Commended. In addition, selected sites had either sustained the highest performance level across years or accountability ratings had improved over time.

Teams of two to three researchers conducted one-day site visits to the 10 selected charter schools. Data col-

lection methods included (a) interviews with administrators, teachers, and in some cases, board members; (b) focus groups of teachers and students; (c) observations conducted primarily in core content-area classrooms; (d) tours of charter school facilities; and (e) document collection. The number and type of participants varied according to the size and complexity of the charter school. In total, researchers conducted interviews with 17 administrators, 29 teachers, and 10 board members; observed in 26 classrooms; conducted nine teacher focus groups involving 48 teachers; and facilitated eight student focus groups including 57 secondary students (grades 6 through 12).

Current research on charter schools identified primary areas of interest (e.g., administrator and teacher roles, educational program, parent involvement, governance). Structured protocols assigned questions to respondents who could provide the most accurate or insightful information on a topic. Data analyses involved the triangulation of qualitative and quantitative data from multiple sources. Guided by major topics of study, researchers used a constant comparative method to identify major themes and relationships. Data gathered from AEIS reports provided contextual and demographic data within which to interpret qualitative findings. Of the 10 sites visited, researchers determined that nine charter schools met standards that warranted their inclusion in the final group; one site was excluded due to data collection problems.

### High-Performing Charter Schools

The nine high-performing charter schools include seven awarded Exemplary ratings in 2002: Encino School, KIPP Academy, Mainland Preparatory Academy, The North Hills School, NYOS Charter School, Seashore Learning Center, and YES College Preparatory Academy. Two charter schools, Focus Learning Academy and John H. Wood Charter School, received Commended ratings

**Charter Schools and Traditional Public School Performance—Percent Receiving Standard and Alternative Education Accountability Ratings**

Rating System	Charter Schools			Traditional Public Schools		
	N=63	N=96	N=91	N=6,363	N=6,616	N=6,444
<b>Standard</b>						
Exemplary	8	5	17	20	24	30
Recognized	11	9	10	32	36	37
Acceptable	49	42	34	46	38	32
Low-Performing	32	44	40	2	2	2
<b>Alternative Education</b>	<b>N=33</b>	<b>N=62</b>	<b>N=109</b>	<b>N=310</b>	<b>N=263</b>	<b>N=230</b>
Commended	0	2	6	2	4	2
Acceptable	27	38	57	88	85	90
Needs Review	73	61	37	11	11	8

Source: TEA Division of Student Performance Reporting. Schools are rated as campuses.

under the alternative education system. Profiles for individual schools, presented in sections to follow, describe school missions, students served, the educational program, parent involvement, school governance, and academic accomplishments. In addition, researchers conducted a cross-site analysis of qualitative and quantitative data to identify prevailing trends that may help explain student achievement.

High-performing charter schools, similar to charters as a whole, are located across the state and serve varied student populations. Schools tend to get a greater share of their revenue from local sources compared to all charter schools. Per-pupil expenditures vary widely across successful charter schools and in some cases exceed average expenditures for all charters and the state. Teachers in high-performing charter schools are more likely to hold degrees, have more years experience, and earn higher salaries than charter school teachers overall.

Researchers identified nine attributes appearing consistently across high-performing charter schools that provide potential explanations for why students in these schools perform better than students in other charter schools. The following findings suggest charter school traits that may foster student academic success.

**Focused mission guides coherent actions.** High-performing charter schools are mission-driven organizations. Schools have typically been founded to achieve a clearly defined educational vision for a specific student population. Wide-ranging missions may focus on preparing students to attend a four-year university, using an innovative curriculum to achieve each child's potential, or other goals. In general, organizational structures and pedagogical practices are coherent with professed beliefs, values, and goals. Although no one configuration (e.g., extended time, combined grades, multiage grouping) or practice (e.g., thematic units, service learning, indi-

vidualized instruction) was considered *innovative*, the overall way in which each school achieved its mission was unique.

**Schools are small, with a developmental grade span.**

Positive outcomes achieved by high-performing charter schools are often associated with small school size. Moreover, schools typically have a grade span supporting a developmental educational continuum, with the foundation for learning laid in earlier grades leading to targeted outcomes at higher grade levels. Small size along with continuity achieved through contact with students over multiple years are frequently viewed as contributors to positive interpersonal relationships between students and staff, a disciplined learning environment, a vertically-aligned curriculum, and enhanced communication and collaboration.

**School culture supports student success.** Each of the charter schools visited had a culture that communicates high expectations for student success. Foremost, one belief was pervasive across schools—given appropriate educational opportunities, all children, regardless of background, can achieve high academic standards. Schools, however, used a variety of approaches to create a culture supporting achievement: motivational slogans, visual symbols, commitments to excellence, goal-setting and rewards for performance, school uniforms, interpersonal connections, individualized attention, and caring and readily available teachers, for example.

**Teachers feel responsible for student learning.** Teachers who choose to work in these charter schools express a high level of ownership for student learning and pride in student accomplishments. Teachers receive a substantial degree of curricular and instructional freedom in exchange for high expectations regarding effective classroom practices and student performance. Teachers, whose input into school decision-making is

**Characteristics of High—performing Charter Schools**

School	Grade Span	#	Students				2002 Rating	Location
			AA	H	W	Eco		
Encino School	PK–8	67	0%	97%	3%	94%	Exemplary	Encino
KIPP Academy	5–9	338	19%	78%	2%	90%	Exemplary	Houston
Mainland Preparatory Academy	PK–8	284	90%	6%	3%	47%	Exemplary	Texas City
NYOS Charter School	PK–10	262	13%	13%	71%	14%	Exemplary	Austin
Seashore Learning Center	K–6	139	0%	17%	78%	30%	Exemplary	Corpus Christi
The North Hills School	1–12	799	9%	8%	60%	2%	Exemplary	Irving
YES College Preparatory School	6–12	423	7%	89%	3%	55%	Exemplary	Houston
Focus Learning Academy	K–7	381	95%	3%	2%	50%	Commended	Dallas
John H. Wood Charter School	6–12	135	18%	44%	37%	93%	Commended	San Antonio

Note. AA=African American, H=Hispanic, W=White, Eco=Economically disadvantaged.

solicited and valued, are often strongly committed to the school mission. In addition, many teachers report being motivated by a desire to serve the school's special student population.

***Students are held responsible and accountable for behavior and learning.*** High-performing charter schools typically create learning environments that allow student ownership of behavior through strategies such as goal setting, assuming responsibility, logical consequences, and rewards. Almost all schools have a specific behavior management plan that is administered consistently in the school. Students are typically described as well mannered, disciplined, polite, cooperative, and motivated. Students who choose to attend these charter schools agree to challenges (along with their parents) regarding the completion of a rigorous academic curriculum and, in most cases, extensive homework. Schools typically have a student waiting list for enrollment.

***Attention to prerequisite knowledge and skills lays a foundation for student success.*** Even though effective charter schools use a wide range of curricular and instructional approaches to support student learning, one consistent theme across schools was attention to building a strong foundation of knowledge and skills that allows students to succeed at increasingly higher levels. Reading comprehension, mathematics, and writing are viewed as critically important to advanced learning. Schools serving disadvantaged student populations commonly enrich the curriculum to build students' background knowledge through field trips, service learning, and real-world activities. Educators speak of teaching for success instead of remediating failure.

***Student accomplishments, beyond state-mandated tests, are expected.*** High-performing charter schools, although pleased to be recognized by the state for achieving Exemplary or Commended status and high passing rates on TAAS, believe there are other even more

important student goals to be accomplished. Successful performance in high school, acceptance to and success in colleges or universities, performance on alternative assessments, and acquisition of social skills needed for everyday life are examples of other student learning outcomes valued by schools.

***Parents are committed to student academic support.*** Although parents may or may not be involved in the day-to-day activities of these charter schools due to time and work constraints, they almost invariably lend strong support for their children's academic achievement through actions such as assisting with homework, checking on progress, visiting the school, communicating regularly with teachers, and supporting disciplinary actions.

***Schools have strong organizational supports and community connections.*** Effective charter schools have highly engaged administrative leaders who assume roles as needed, including, for example, academic leader, teacher/substitute teacher, financial manager, or janitor. These schools also receive strong support from governing boards that generally include a blend of professionals (e.g., business, law, finance, health, higher education), community members, and parents. Boards typically are not involved in day-to-day school management but instead provide guidance, oversight for financial activities, expertise needed by the school, and assistance with fund raising and resource acquisition. Overall, these schools have strong community connections that contribute to their success.

## The Profiles

Profiles for individual schools, presented in the following sections, introduce readers to charter schools' varying missions, student populations, organizational features, educational approaches, and student learning outcomes.

### Financial Data and Teacher Characteristics for High-Performing Charter Schools

School	Revenue and Expenditure*				Teachers**				
	Revenue			Per-Pupil	#	Hold Degree	Yrs Exp	Turn-over	Average Salary
	Local	State	Fed.						
Encino School	4%	83%	12%	\$6,365	4	100%	12.0	20%	\$34,757
KIPP Academy	48%	43%	9%	\$10,378	17	88%	3.9	47%	\$37,054
Mainland Preparatory Academy	75%	23%	1%	\$9,848	18	100%	7.9	53%	\$33,710
NYOS Charter School	14%	83%	3%	\$7,104	30	93%	5.1	35%	\$34,497
Seashore Learning Center	5%	91%	4%	\$5,099	9	100%	7.0	58%	\$28,177
The North Hills School	10%	89%	1%	\$5,506	66	96%	7.1	32%	\$31,890
YES College Preparatory School	14%	56%	30%	\$8,886	30	87%	4.5	44%	\$37,655
Focus Learning Academy	6%	83%	12%	\$7,744	36	92%	7.1	21%	\$33,097
John H. Wood Charter School	0%	95%	5%	\$13,305	2	100%	9.5	83%	\$44,501
All charters	8%	77%	15%	\$6,762	--	84%	5.4	49%	\$29,343
Traditional public schools	52%	39%	9%	\$7,851	--	99%	11.9	16%	\$39,232

Source: \* Actual financial data for all funds, PEIMS 2001-02. \*\* AEIS reports 2001-02.

# Encino School

## ENCINO

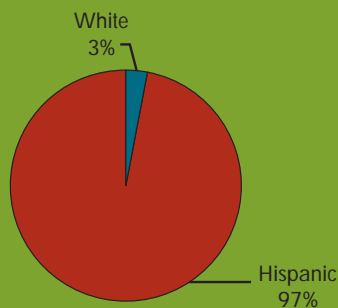
“It was like fighting City Hall.” But, when faced with what would be a daunting task for any community—keeping their only school open—Encino’s students, parents, teachers, administrators, and residents banded together and did just that. This small rural South Texas community, with a total population 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

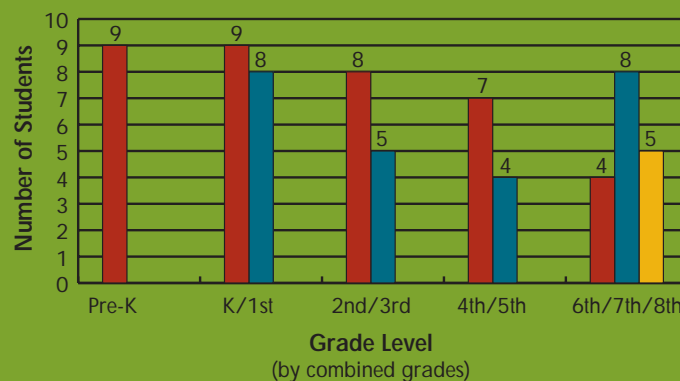
Encino School serves 67 students in grades pre-kindergarten through 8. Approximately 97 percent of the students are Hispanic, and 94 percent

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

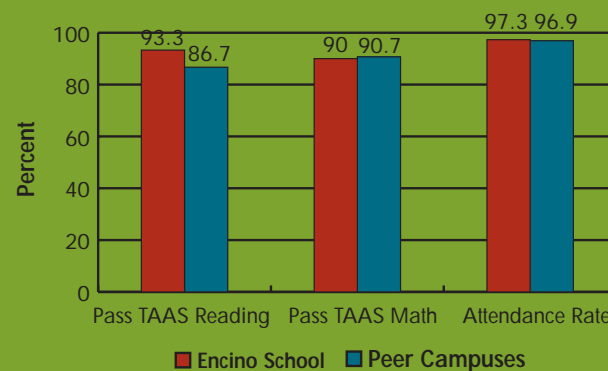
Parental involvement also contributes substantially to the school’s success story. A board member attributes one reason for success to the “interaction between the board and the community and the parents. It’s a very, very tight-knit community and that’s probably the greatest strength. The parents feel 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.

# KIPP Academy

## HOUSTON

Motivational slogans, aimed at raising students' expectations for success, are everywhere—printed on blackboards, painted on wall banners, stenciled on sidewalks. One favorite may be this: Work Hard, Be Nice. Work hard, they do. KIPP Academy students agree to spend more time in school compared to their traditional public school peers. They and their teachers experience a longer school day, in addition to Saturday school and summer school. Teachers are readily available, providing students with home phone, cellular, and pager numbers and responding to a toll-free number for student homework questions and emergencies. And nice? Yes, they are. Students call their teachers “ma’am” and “sir,” hold doors open for their teachers and for each other, and raise their hands in the classroom. Houston’s KIPP (Knowledge is Power Program) Academy takes its stated mission very seriously: To prepare students with the academic skills, intellectual habits, and qualities of character necessary to succeed in high school, college, and the competitive world beyond.

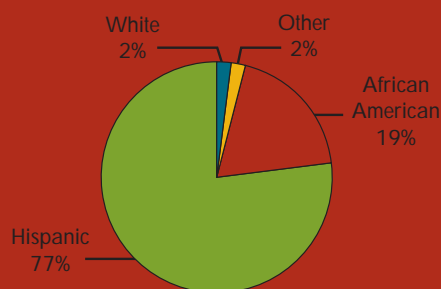
### Student and School Characteristics

Although an open-enrollment charter school, KIPP Academy’s 338 students are predominately minority (78 percent Hispanic and 19 percent

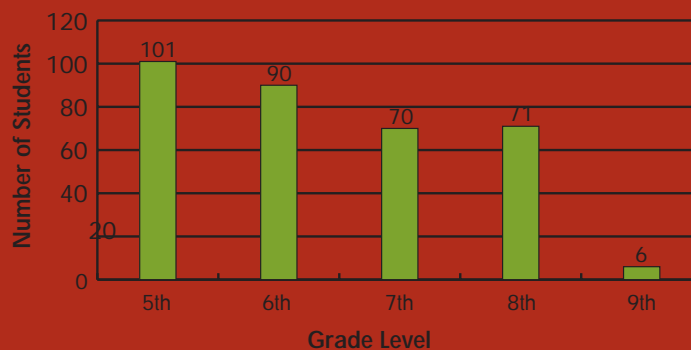
African American) and low-income (90 percent qualify for free or reduced lunch). As Director Elliott Witney says, “If we could screen, we probably would screen for the lowest-achieving kids because our point is any kid can learn if you put them in an environment where they feel a structure and support and it’s fun.” Most students are in grades 5 through 8, with a handful of students attending grade 9 at KIPP due to special circumstances. Class sizes are somewhat larger than average at KIPP, with approximately 30 students per class, but students report that the overall small school size helps compensate for the larger class sizes. The director has been at KIPP’s helm for just longer than a year. Like many charter school administrators, he reports having many roles, including academic leader and financial manager. One important role, according to the director, is this: “I’m accountable to our board of directors and our superintendent to make sure that what we’re doing is great as opposed to mediocre.”

Teachers at KIPP come from all walks of life. Some are recent college graduates, and others came to teaching from the business world; some have traditional or alternative certification and others are not certified. Discussing teacher certification, the school’s director says, “You can have uncertified teachers who are outstanding, and you can have

Student race/ethnicity: AEIS 2001–02



Student Enrollment in KIPP Academy, Houston: AEIS 2001–02



certified teachers who are not.” One of the most important qualities for teachers at KIPP is the willingness to work hard for the benefit of the children. Although there are no requirements or incentives for professional development, teachers may choose from a wide variety of training opportunities offered both locally and nationally. Teachers also have several staff development days each year.



## Educational Program

One difference between KIPP Academy and other schools is the amount of time students spend in class. Students attend classes from 7:25 a.m. until 5 p.m. Monday through Thursday, from 7:25 a.m. until 4 p.m. on Friday, for four hours every other Saturday, and for one month each summer. Students also face between two and three hours of homework each night. Using a college preparatory curriculum, KIPP gives extra emphasis to the core content areas, such as math, English, history, and science, especially during students’ first two years. Students also receive instruction in Thinking Skills (grade 5) and Study Skills (grade 6). In grades 7 and 8, students may participate in organized athletics and enrichment activities as long as academics remain a priority and their grades remain high. Additionally, grades 7 and 8 have study hall and assigned silent reading time daily. KIPP stresses the importance of reading regularly, and rather than assigning students books, which may be above or below their capabilities, students are allowed to choose books “at their comprehension level so that they read with the experience of deep comprehension, so that they know when they’re not comprehending.” Teachers have the freedom to deliver content as they desire, but all constantly monitor stu-

dents for comprehension and understanding. As one teacher says, “The process, it’s reflective. Like okay, wait, this isn’t working? I need to go back and redesign my curriculum....” Another says, “We’re really trying to teach for understanding and not just coverage.” Teachers and administrators also communicate regularly with KIPP alumni about their post-KIPP academic progress. If a former student indicates, for example, that he or she is having difficulties with grammar, KIPP teachers focus on correcting that particular knowledge gap before sending their current charges on to high school.

KIPP teachers approach instruction and instructional methods collaboratively. In addition to regular formal and frequent impromptu meetings to discuss student achievement, teachers will sometimes switch grade-level classrooms (i.e., the 4th-grade math teacher will teach the 5th-grade class and vice versa) just to make sure they are on the “right track.” This allows teachers to identify and correct potential problems or knowledge gaps before student grade-level promotion occurs.

The first year for KIPP students, grade 5, is a foundation-building year. For example, the director calls fifth-grade math a “Swiss cheese class,” in which instruction is geared toward “filling in the holes” or

### School Characteristics

Founded	1994
Grades	5 to 9
Enrollment	338
Daily schedule (M–Th)	7:25 a.m. to 5 p.m.
Daily schedule (F)	7:25 a.m. to 4 p.m.
Saturday (two per month)	9:15 a.m. to 1:05 p.m.
Summer (four weeks)	7:25 a.m. to 2 p.m.
Student attendance rate	99.1%
Student dropout rate	0%

*Source:* 2001–02 AEIS report.

### School Staffing

Number of teachers	16.8
Number of instructional aides	0
Student-teacher ratio	20.2 to 1
Beginning teachers	5.8%
Teachers with 1–5 years experience	75.9%
Teacher average years experience	3.9
Teacher turnover rate	47.1%
Teachers with no degree	11.7%
Teachers with advanced degrees	18.3%
Average teacher salary	\$37,054
Average campus administrator salary	\$54,757

*Source:* 2001–02 AEIS report.

gaps in basic mathematical understanding. English in grade 5 focuses on reading and writing. Rather than just teaching reading skills, however, the goal is to make students “life-long lovers of reading.” Students are encouraged to read as much as possible during the school year, and students often complete between 40 and 60 books. The science curriculum also follows a logical progression and again focuses on building a strong foundation. When possible, the curriculum is tailored to coincide with other learning experiences. For example, grade 6 students’ yearly end-of-semester field trip is a camping trip to Utah—thus, instruction focuses on earth science in preparation for the trip.

In addition to teaching traditional academic skills, teachers structure classes to teach and encourage strong organizational skills. Most teachers, for example, have their students manage their daily accumulation of notes, projects, and tests in files or binders. At the end of the year, the student has a well-organized resource that can be referred to as needed. As KIPP’s director notes, classes are structured to “get the kids to operate like a university student would.”

Teachers suggest that KIPP’s student management strategies also contribute substantially to the learning environment. Students must “earn” everything at KIPP, from their seat on the first class day, to the monthly and yearly field trips, to the right to wear a gold-colored shirt as an 8th grader. As one teacher says, time and energy spent on classroom discipline take time and energy away from classroom learning. Behavior infractions, ranging from acting up in class to failure to

complete homework assignments, accumulate as “strikes;” enough strikes and certain privileges are taken away. Students may also earn rewards for good behavior or for jobs (re-shelving library books, for example) performed around the school.

KIPP also supports students who need a little extra help. An after-school program is in place (from 5 until 8:30 p.m.) for students who are having organizational, time management, or study skills problems or difficulties with consistently completing homework assignments. There is also staff support for student and family outreach and a high school/college counselor. Outside services, such as social services, are contracted out when a need arises. Bottom line, KIPP’s philosophy is simply stated if not simply accomplished: “Just do whatever it takes for [students] to be successful.”

## Parental Involvement

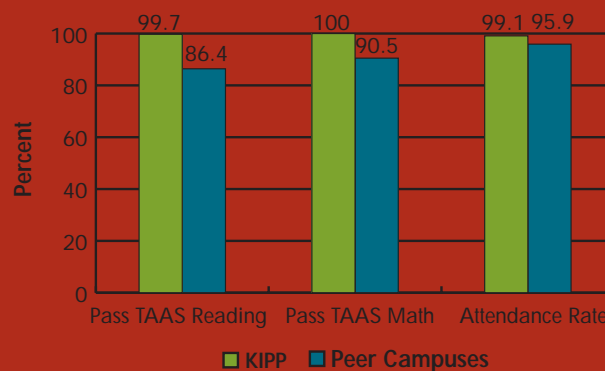
Parents (and students and teachers) must sign a Commitment to Excellence Form when their child enrolls at KIPP Adacemy. In addition to committing to typical standards, such as the school’s schedule and dress code and their child’s regular attendance, parents agree to “Always help our child in the best way we know how, and [to] do whatever it takes for him/her to learn.” A big part of this commitment includes checking homework nightly. Although the commitment is not legally binding, the director has no trouble reminding a parent of the initial commitment when necessary: “After they signed it two years ago, they sometimes forget their commitment, so you pull it back out and say remember this?”

### School Finance

Per-pupil expenditure	\$10,378
Per-pupil for instruction	\$7,430
Local revenue	48%
State revenue	43%
Federal revenue	9%

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

Comparison of Performance for KIPP Academy and Peer Campuses: AEIS 2001–02



The director prefers to speak of parental involvement in terms of “parental support,” saying, “Primarily what we ask of our parents is that they ensure that our kids do their homework and they come to school.” Parents do help out in other ways. The Parents’ Association helps fundraise for the school and for scholarships by selling concessions at sporting events; other parents assist by chaperoning on KIPP’s frequent outings or by helping out around the campus. Parents also feel free to check in with teachers or administrators about their child’s academic progress. Additionally, “paychecks,” detailing students’ behavior, a part of KIPP’s ongoing student management strategy, go home with the students each week for a parental review and signature.

## Governance

KIPP Academy’s 16-member board includes CEOs, bankers, attorneys, community volunteers, and KIPP parents. The board’s contribution to the school is primarily in the financial arena. They assisted with a \$7 million capital campaign for KIPP’s current facility and are now helping fundraise for campus improvements, including the elimination of several temporary structures. Additionally, the board is assisting with a five-year plan designed to contribute to the school’s ongoing stability. There are also several board-member committees (e.g., finance, education, development) that meet regularly. The board is also the school’s champion. “They...support what we do and get out in the community and share what we do,” says the director.

## Accomplishments

Students’ and teachers’ hard work has paid off. KIPP Academy has been rated as Exemplary by the TEA each year since 1994, its founding year. In 2002, the most recent year for which statistics are available, 99 percent or more of all KIPP students passed both the reading and math sections of the TAAS test. Perhaps even more remarkably, 100 percent of grades 6 through 8 students passed both sections in 2002 (results are similar for 2000 and 2001). KIPP also is very proud of the fact that they claim no exemptions, meaning that every KIPP student is tested.

Additionally, KIPP Academy received TEA’s Gold Performance Acknowledgment, which recognizes high performance on other factors contributing to overall academic success, for an attendance rate of more than 99 percent in 2002. But how do the students feel about KIPP? This student’s comment, when asked what she likes best about KIPP, is representative: “[I like] how you can come here and feel safe and know that you’re going to have a good education for the future.”

### Campus Accountability Rating

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 5	92.9	96.8	99.0	97.1	100.0	100.0
Grade 6	98.4	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Grade 7	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Grade 8	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0	100.0
Grade 9	--	--	--	--	--	--

Source: AEIS reports.

# 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.

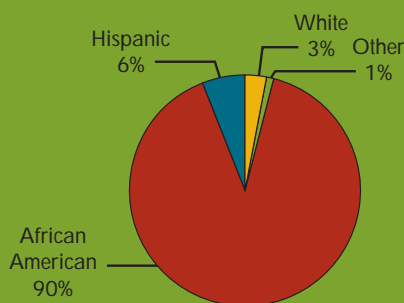
Mainland Preparatory Academy’s mission statement reflects both its commitment to academic excellence and community service: “To provide a quality education to its students through a structured program of basic skills acquisition. The program of activities is designed to prepare students to be productive,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

### Student and School Characteristics

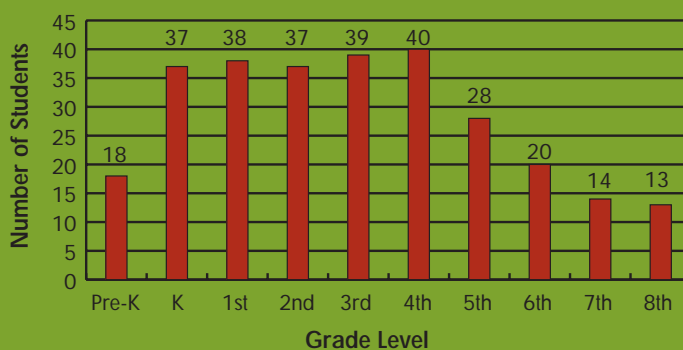
The 284 students at Mainland Preparatory Academy are predominantly African American (90 percent), with 6 percent Hispanic and 3 percent White; less than half the students (47 percent) are classified as economically disadvantaged. The attendance rate for the last two school years has topped 97 percent. 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**

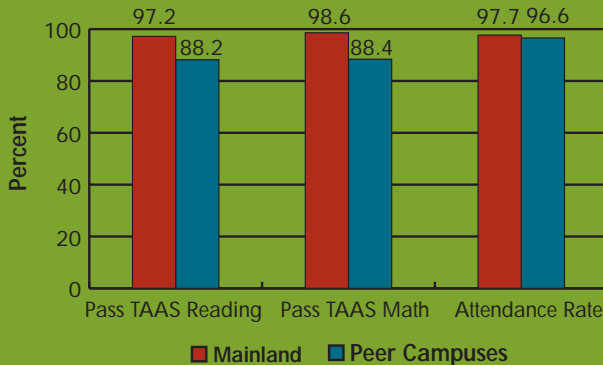
Administrators and teachers see a difference between parental involvement at Mainland Preparatory Academy and schools where they have

**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.

# NYOS Charter School

## AUSTIN

When asked why they started NYOS Charter School, school founders state simply, “We knew there was a better way.” Determined to live up to its name, Not Your Ordinary School (NYOS) opened its doors in 1998 to students in grades kindergarten through grade 7 and has expanded to add one grade level each year since. The school was founded by a group of educators who had worked together for many years in traditional public schools and were somewhat frustrated by their experience with increasingly larger enrollments, test-driven instructional methods, and curricular modification accompanying each administration change. As the NYOS principal explains, the group was motivated by commitment to a curricular and instructional approach they felt was very effective and wanted the freedom to implement the approach consistently over time. NYOS strives to incorporate an innovative curriculum with the vision that “every child realizes their maximum potential.”

### Student Characteristics

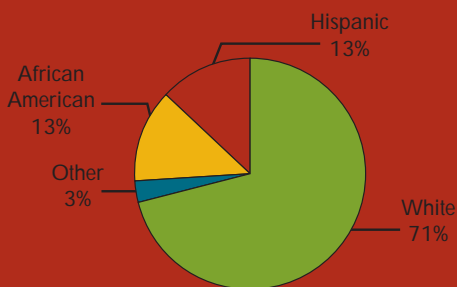
NYOS currently has two campuses in Austin serving somewhat different student populations. The school began at its Gessner campus and has since expanded to a new building on Lamar Boulevard.

Currently, the Gessner campus serves students in grades pre-kindergarten through 2 and the Lamar campus serves grades kindergarten through 11. In 2001–02, NYOS enrolled a total of 262 students at its two campuses. Overall, NYOS students are predominately White (72 percent), with small percentages Hispanic (13 percent) and African American (13 percent). Approximately 14 percent of students are classified as economically disadvantaged, and 6 percent qualify for special education services. These overall averages, however, do not reflect the differing demographic characteristics of the two campuses. The Gessner campus serves a more ethnically and economically diverse population; almost half (44 percent) its students are African American and 58 percent are economically disadvantaged.

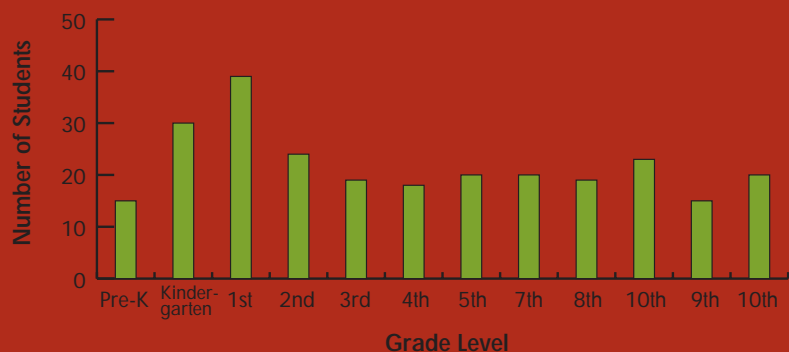
### School Characteristics

Aside from serving different grade levels, the educational program and schedule at NYOS’ two campuses are the same. Students attend classes the typical 180 days per year; however, the school uses a year-round calendar with two- to three-week intercessions scheduled each quarter. Additionally, the attendance rate is quite high (96 percent), and there are no student dropouts.

Student race/ethnicity: AEIS 2001–02



Student Enrollment in NYOS Charter School: AEIS 2001–02



The administrative structure of NYOS is minimal, including a principal (who also serves as counselor), an assistant principal, and a business administrator. NYOS has 24 teachers, with the majority (54 percent) having between one and five years teaching experience, and some (17 percent) having advanced degrees.

Though administrators report that recruiting teachers initially was somewhat difficult due to the uncertainty of charter schools and lower pay compared to traditional public schools, this is no longer a problem and the school receives dozens of applications for any open position. Due to funding limitations and small school size, administrators seek to hire teachers who have multiple skills or areas of expertise. NYOS also strives to keep pay scales comparable to neighboring school districts to attract qualified teachers. Teachers also are included in the hiring process to a large extent. "I've never hired a teacher," states the NYOS principal, "the staff hires the teachers...the people they're going to be working with...that is definitely a group process."

NYOS founders believe strongly that every child is gifted, so they require that all teachers receive gifted and talented endorsements and special education certification within two years of being hired. They believe this requirement ensures that a teacher can adequately teach every child in a classroom, including those with special needs. To facilitate further teacher professional development and collaboration, NYOS dismisses students early each Friday to allow for faculty meetings. These meetings include a variety of topics and formats. Some weeks are devoted to whole-group faculty meetings about policy issues, other days are set aside for vertical team or grade-level meetings.



This time also is used for formal professional development sessions on issues such as discipline. In addition, administrators report that many teachers use their time during intercessions to attend professional development sessions out of town or out of state.

Friday afternoon meetings also allow teachers an opportunity to voice concerns or suggest programs. "We can talk about issues and initiate things," commented one teacher. "Curriculum, management, policies, anything...of course, it has to be okayed by the principal, but other than that we have a lot of room to initiate." Teachers believe their input is valued, and the fact that there are several teacher representatives on the governing board further substantiates teacher importance. One teacher explained the effect of this feature on school success: "Teacher input is always important as far as if you're thinking about school and what makes the school successful. Teachers are respected and our opinions are valued."

## Educational Program

The educational program at NYOS has many unique characteristics that set it apart from most traditional public schools. One of the most noticeable differ-

### School Characteristics

Founded	1997
Grades	PK to 2; K to 11
Enrollment	262
Daily schedule	8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
Days of instruction	180 (year-round)
Student attendance rate	96%
Student dropout rate	0%

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

### School Staffing

Number of teachers	24
Student-teacher ratio	12 to 1
Beginning teachers	8%
Teacher average years experience	5.1
Teacher turnover rate	35%
Teachers with no degree	7%
Teachers with advanced degrees	17%
Average teacher salary	\$34,497
Average campus administrator salary	\$50,450
Average central administrator salary	\$40,001

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

ences is multi-age grouping. Two or three grade levels are typically grouped into each section (i.e., 2-3, 4-5, 9-11). NYOS founders and administrators believe strongly in this approach and its effect on children’s learning. “Life is multi-age,” comments the NYOS principal, “Families are multi-age...children learn from each other, not always the younger learning from the older.” Using multi-age grouping allows students to stay with the same teacher for multiple years (i.e., looping). Teachers say this approach, along with small class sizes (maximum 15:1 student-teacher ratio), allows them to be more effective in the classroom. “I would say one of the biggest and most significant differences is that you have a chance to develop a relationship with a kid and learn their learning style,” explained one teacher. “Usually the classes are 15 or less, and I’ll have them for years...even if I just had them two years, that would be much better than having them one year and then passing them on.” Additionally, students are assigned to classes by academic ability rather than age. When questioned about this approach, students say they benefit. One student commented, “You’re placed on ability, not so much grade level. If you’re a kindergartner and can do fourth-grade work, they’re not going to hold you back for that.” To accommodate multiple grade levels in the same classroom, an individual learning plan is prepared for each student. This plan guides teachers in creating assignments and experiences that best meet the needs of each student.

This individualized approach also is characteristic of the instructional methods at NYOS. Whole-group instruction is very limited and instead teachers primarily work with students individually. This

approach is supported by the school’s lack of reliance on textbooks. No textbooks are used at the elementary level; at the high school level, they are considered just one of many resources available. One teacher explains this approach: “We use textbooks as resources...we have to use different types of resources to kind of pull in the best of what we think will work.”

Another key component of NYOS’ educational philosophy is the concept of building personal power in students. The NYOS principal explains this idea: “We never do for someone what they can do for themselves. We are very much on building personal power in the students, and the only way to do that is to not enable them to depend on us.” Based on this approach, teachers say they use more student-centered, discovery-type methods in which students have to figure things out for themselves. In math, for instance, most teachers write the majority of their problems. Instead of students working a set of problems, teachers require students to find multiple strategies for solving the same problem. Even students say that this approach, while frustrating at times, helps them learn. “It’s more exploratory, you’re given the information about a concept, and you have to explore to find the solution. It’s frustrating sometimes, but you learn something.”

Content-area learning is supported by the use of specific approaches such as Cognitively Guided Instruction (CGI) in math and the Literacy Learning Network (LLN) in reading and language arts. CGI uses students’ natural problem solving abilities to help them understand math and solve problems using a method of their choice instead

**School Finance**

Per-pupil expenditure	\$7,104
Per-pupil for instruction	\$3,714
Local revenue	14%
State revenue	83%
Federal revenue	3%

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

of one imposed by the teacher. For reading instruction, NYOS teachers use the LLN approach, a writing-to-read model that focuses on students' writing in the process of learning to read. More recently, NYOS has received a grant to focus more attention and professional development on Integrated Thematic Instruction. Although only in its beginning stages, this model will eventually influence classroom atmosphere, organization of topical units, and assessment, as thematic units are incorporated across all subject areas and grade levels. Like many of the strategies used at NYOS, administrators believe this approach most closely resembles what happens in daily life. The NYOS principal explains: "We just believe very strongly that what you're learning is integrated...your day doesn't have a math section and a reading section and a science section, it's all integrated." To further support this thematic approach, teachers are encouraged to take students on any fieldtrips they feel would support their learning. Students mentioned trips to farms, museums, amusement parks, and local businesses that corresponded to units they were studying.

The notion of building a sense of empowerment in students is also evident in NYOS disciplinary approach. Administrators, faculty, and students are trained in a program called Redirecting Children's Behavior (RCB). RCB focuses on offering students choices and helps teachers (or others) understand a child's needs. The assistant principal describes the program this way:

Kids are given a responsibility to take care of themselves...it [RCB] just helps you to implement your program in a way where you are listening and looking and trying to understand what it is that is underlying the outward emotion.

Instead of punishments, natural and logical consequences help students understand the effect of their behavior. "If you don't bring your stuff to class," explains one teacher, "the natural, logical consequence is you're not prepared for class, you can't do what we're doing, it affects your participation grade for today."

Another feature that sets NYOS apart from most traditional public schools is its use of authentic assessment. At the elementary level, classes are nongraded, and teachers rely on portfolios and rubrics to assess students' progress. In the upper grade levels, a variety of assessment techniques are used. Although middle-school and high-school teachers describe using rubrics for areas such as writing, some numeric grades are assigned as well. High school teachers and administrators struggle with the need to assign grades for students applying to colleges while still holding to their desire for authentic assessment. Currently, NYOS uses a nontraditional grading scale for high school students in which 100-94 is an "A", 93-87 is a "B," and so forth. Teachers and administrators, however, are exploring other grading scales or models of assessment that can best meet the needs of high school students.

NYOS administrators also use authentic methods in their approach to teacher appraisal, including observations by teacher leaders and administrators, self-evaluations, and discussions with administrators. According to the NYOS principal, teacher appraisal focuses on finding teachers' strengths and challenges rather than giving a teacher a "grade." "I want to look at their strengths," she explains, "I want to use the people for the right thing and use their knowledge that they have, which might be totally unrelated to their teaching area, to help build the school."

*"You've got to hold to your goals, and primarily, it is to give kids the opportunity to really learn at their maximum potential."*

## Parental Involvement

By all accounts, parents play a huge role in the operation of NYOS. Although parents are required to spend 20 hours annually volunteering for the school, administrators and teachers say many parents devote hours beyond the minimum requirement. Each campus has a parent volunteer committee to offer parents an organized means of volunteering. In addition to the typical fundraising activities, parents are involved with the school on a daily basis by chaperoning trips, working at book fairs, and providing teachers with additional resources for their classrooms. Some parents also offer valuable services to the school. One NYOS parent, who also is a registered nurse, provides the students with periodic hearing and vision tests required by state regulations. Administrators also report parents began managing the cafeteria after the school had problems with the former provider. In several instances, parents also have made substantial financial contributions to the school. The principal reports that during the first two years of operation, a group of parents provided funds to give every teacher a small Christmas bonus. Similarly, one parent offered \$1,000 toward the purchase of a new air conditioner. Administrators say parents also influence elements of the school's educational program, such as minimal homework. "You don't just have homework for the sake of having homework," comments the principal. "We want your evenings to be family time, and I think that's another thing that's helped our parents be able to enjoy being up here—they're not having to do homework with their kids every night, so they get to have normal family time at night."

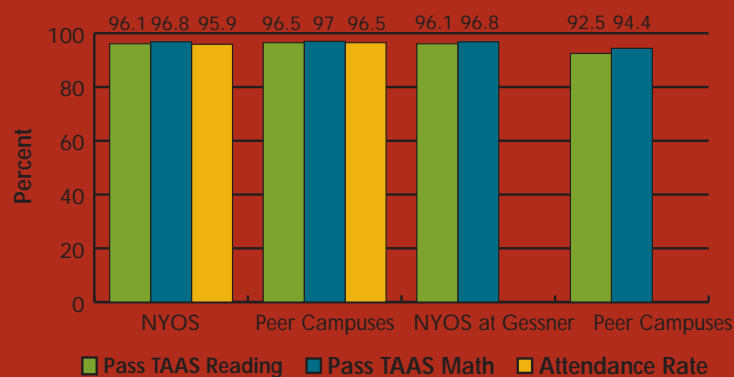
## Governance

NYOS' governing board is composed of 11 members representing parents, teachers, administration, and local business people. The board's primary responsibilities center on budgeting, policy, long-range planning, student recruitment and retention, and safety issues in addition to administrative personnel decisions. Board members comment that the relationship between the board and administration is productive, with the common goal being the school's success. "There's a common goal," says one board member. "That's what we have here...a real common interest, and that's a real unifying force." The governing board also tries to be responsive to parents. Besides having four parent representatives, the board uses an annual survey to gauge parent concerns. The governing board formally addresses any issue raised by more than 10 percent of parents. Although addressing parents' concerns is a high priority, board members also say outside community members have a voice. "We have outside people, people from the community who have no other involvement with the school...that gives a whole different perspective," explains a parent representative on the board.

## Accomplishments

Efforts to be *extraordinary*—through the use of an innovative curriculum and teaching strategy at Not Your Ordinary School—seem to be working. They have garnered high accountability rating and their students continue to perform well above state averages on TAAS. Additionally, high percentages of NYOS students pass subject-specific

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



end-of-course exams, with more than 90 percent of students passing Algebra I and English II in 2002.

Although they are proud to be rated an Exemplary school, NYOS administrators stress that their goals for students extend well beyond TAAS. They explain that the way the state classifies schools as Exemplary is “not necessarily the way that we would classify ourselves as an exemplary school because the goals that we have for our kids are not encompassed in the criteria.” From the beginning, NYOS has made a concerted effort not to engage in the drill-and-practice methods commonly associated with standardized test preparation. Instead, administrators say they focus on their primary goal—to “give kids the opportunity to really learn at their maximal potential.”

#### Campus Accountability Rating

2000	Recognized
2001	Acceptable
2002	Exemplary

*Source:* 2001–02 AEIS report.

#### TAAS Percent Passing

	TAAS Reading			TAAS Math		
	2000	2001	2002	2000	2001	2002
Grade 3	100.0	100.0	83.3	70.0	100.0	94.1
Grade 4	94.4	100.0	100.0	83.3	100.0	92.9
Grade 5	92.3	100.0	94.7	83.3	94.4	94.7
Grade 6	100.0	100.0	100.0	91.7	91.7	100.0

*Source:* AEIS reports.

# Seashore Learning Center

## CORPUS CHRISTI

After years of failed attempts to establish a public elementary school on Padre Island, Seashore Learning Center opened as a private school in 1995. The passage of charter school legislation offered the school an opportunity to become a public school, and in 1996, it became one of the first 20 open-enrollment charter schools in Texas. Serving kindergarten through sixth grade, the school focuses on providing students a strong basis, both educationally and socially, for their future endeavors. Driven by the needs of the local community, Seashore Learning Center is “dedicated to developing self-esteem, confidence, and social skills in each individual student while providing a foundation for a child’s high level of academic achievement.”

### Student Characteristics

In 2001–02, Seashore Learning Center enrolled 139 students at its Padre Island facility. The majority of these students are White (79 percent), with small percentages Hispanic (17 percent) and other (4 percent) ethnicities. Compared to the state average (51 percent), Seashore serves a small proportion (30 percent) of economically disadvantaged students. Approximately 7 percent of the school’s students qualify for special education services.

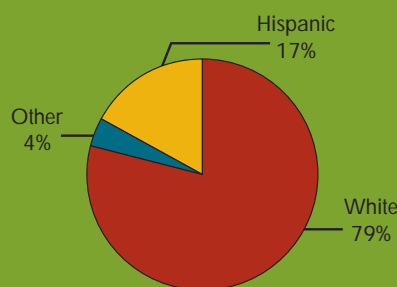
### School Characteristics

Seashore Learning Center students follow a traditional school calendar, attending classes 177 days per year. School days are relatively short, with classes from 7:45 a.m. until 2:30 p.m. Administrators strongly believe that uniforms help create an equitable environment and limit self-consciousness; therefore, they are mandatory for all students.

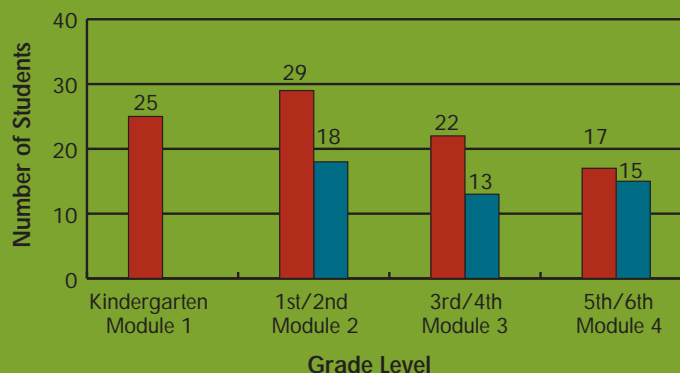
Seashore employs a small teaching staff (nine teachers) and has a student-to-teacher ratio of 15 to 1. All teachers are required to be certified, and 11 percent have advanced degrees. Most faculty (66 percent) have between one and five years prior teaching experience, and in 2001–02, Seashore employed no first-year teachers.

The Seashore director describes her role as much like that of a principal—“guiding the school forward in educational terms, staff development, [and] student progress;” however, she notes, that it has a business aspect as well. Although the governing board makes the final decision regarding personnel matters, the director and teachers work together in hiring new staff. “Generally, it has been a collaborative effort for the personnel decisions. It is not just me making a decision and

Student race/ethnicity: AEIS 2001–02



Student Enrollment in Seashore Learning Center: AEIS 2001–02



choosing people,” says the director. Typically, the school has few problems recruiting qualified applicants. The director reports that the school received more than 200 applicants for available positions last year. The director, however, informs potential candidates that teaching positions come with high expectations: “One of the types of teachers that we may attract are those teachers who taught with regular public education and think they are coming to an easy option, but actually when they get here, it is not, and it is very important for me to let them know that.”

Teachers report that professional development is expected and enthusiastically supported by the director. They mention attending sessions on everything from math assessment to service learning and technology training. “There are people who are leaving here for training constantly for something,” says one teacher. “I would say at least once a month somebody is getting trained for something.” Although teachers are not required to attend a specific number of professional development sessions, most believe that the expectation of ongoing learning is part of the school’s philosophy. “The teachers here feel the need for that because of the type of philosophy we have here, and the way we conduct our program here...you have to be innovative.”

## Educational Program

The educational program at Seashore Learning Center differs from that of most traditional public schools in a number of ways. With the exception of kindergarten, students are grouped into multi-age “modules.” Kindergartners are separated into their own module due to their social and cognitive needs.



The three remaining modules are formed by combining two traditional grade levels (i.e., 1–2, 3–4, 5–6). The Seashore curriculum integrates the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) with E.D. Hirsch’s Core Knowledge components. Teachers work together to design thematic units that incorporate all subject areas.

Instructionally, hands-on learning is highly encouraged, and students are expected to take responsibility for their own learning. “It is not a case of sitting down and the teacher provides all this information... There is a lot of very active learning where students go into situations,” says the director. To meet the needs of multiple ages and grade levels, teachers utilize heterogeneous instructional groups and homogeneous interest groups that help students learn from one another. To facilitate this type of learning, students are not seated in desks in rows but rather at tables in groups. Though teachers are given curricular guidance, they have autonomy to design classroom activities that will best meet the needs of their students. “We can provide the TEKS to the teachers and say there is your guidance,” explains the director, “but how they actually bring that to life is through cooperative learning, is through the hands-on activi-

### School Characteristics

Founded	1996
Grades	K to 6
Enrollment	139
Daily schedule	7:45 a.m. to 2:30 p.m.
Days of instruction	177
Student attendance rate	96%
Student dropout rate	N/A

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

### School Staffing

Number of teachers	9
Student-teacher ratio	15 to 1
Beginning teachers	0%
Teacher average years experience	6.9
Teacher turnover rate	58.3%
Teachers with no degree	0%
Teachers with advanced degrees	11.0%
Average teacher salary	\$28,177
Average campus administrator salary	\$28,000
Average central administrator salary	\$45,320

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

ties...all of that really brings it to life. And equally, I think our kids are encouraged from the moment they step into school to be independent learners.”

Students also are encouraged to take responsibility for their learning through the assessment process. Instead of report cards or progress reports, every nine weeks students lead a parent-teacher conference to demonstrate their knowledge and abilities. Students and teachers present portfolios of the student’s work, and students exhibit skills they have learned during the nine-week period. In addition to being a useful assessment tool, teachers say these conferences help keep them accountable. One teacher commented, “It really forces me to be very accountable...we have to have everything pulled together.” Besides these student-led conferences, teachers also use other assessment tools such as skills checklists, rubrics, artwork (for younger students), and informal observational assessment.

At Seashore, lunchtime is also an important part of the educational program. Students bring lunch from home and eat family-style at small tables complete with placemat, cloth napkins, glass dinnerware, and silverware. While eating lunch with their class, teachers reinforce table manners and etiquette. After lunch, students clean their tables and wash their own dishes. Although this approach is sometimes challenging for younger students, teachers believe the experience teaches valuable lessons. Some teachers even incorporate aspects of the lunch process, such as sequencing and nutrition, into their instruction.

Overall, teachers report that discipline problems are rare at Seashore. The vast majority of students are very motivated and eager to learn. When questioned about the policy for office discipline referrals, teachers indicate that no referral form exists because it has never been necessary. Teachers add jokingly that the only challenge they experience is students occasionally talking amongst themselves, usually about class projects. Teachers say students are so used to talking and working together in groups that when it comes time for them to work independently, they have to be scattered around the classroom. On the rare occasion a student does not comply with class rules or does not participate in class, teachers simply have the student talk with the director or one of the lead teachers. Teachers report that parental contact is another method they sometimes use to address student discipline problems. In most cases, the mere threat of parental contact is sufficient to solve the problem. “If you even say, ‘I’m going to call your mom,’ they are perfect the rest of the day,” comments one teacher.

### Parental Involvement

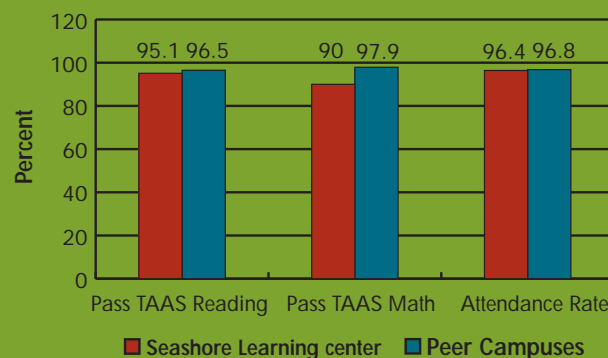
In addition to student-led conferences, parents are involved in Seashore Learning Center activities in a variety of ways. Parents are expected to participate in one of four committees: curriculum support, fundraising, maintenance, or curriculum instruction. Many parents also help daily with the lunch program, monitoring students in cleaning and washing dishes. Annual events, such as a winter tea, also are held for parents. These events support the school’s fundraising efforts and promote

### School Finance

Per-pupil expenditure	\$5,099
Per-pupil for instruction	\$2,467
Local revenue	14%
State revenue	83%
Federal revenue	3%

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

Comparison of Performance for Seashore Learning Center and Peer Campuses: AEIS 2001-02



parental involvement. Teachers also report that parents assist in the classroom by running errands or completing tasks such as making copies. Teachers say parents come several times a week asking, “What can I help you do?” In fact, some teachers say parents’ eagerness to help contrasts dramatically with their previous schools, and they had to become accustomed to it when beginning at Seashore. “That was one of the hardest things for me to get used to,” reports one teacher, “because I was used to having to do everything completely on my own.” Overall, teachers say the level of parental involvement at Seashore not only helps them but also ultimately benefits students educationally: “We can actually focus more on the instruction instead of all of the paperwork and red tape.”

## Governance

The board of directors for the school’s sponsoring entity—Island Foundation, Inc.—acts as Seashore Learning Center’s governing body. The foundation was created by a group of parents and community members working to establish an elementary school on Padre Island. Parents remain an important part of the governing board, with one elected parent member and a parent liaison. Board members come from a variety of professions including business, medicine, nonprofit, and education. The governing board’s primary responsibilities relate to budgeting, policy issues, and fundraising. The board also hires the school’s director. Although the Seashore director is not a member of the board, she reports on the school’s activities and events at monthly meetings. She believes this level of interaction not only helps keep her accountable for the school, but also offers her guidance in leadership.

## Accomplishments

Since its founding, Seashore Learning Center’s unique approach to elementary education has produced positive results. Seashore has never earned an accountability rating below Recognized, and in 2002, received an Exemplary rating. As the school’s director simply states, “The results speak for themselves.”

Given that Seashore students are accustomed to hands-on activities and assessments, teachers say, for many students, the challenge of the TAAS was the format of a paper-and-pencil test rather than the content. “The challenge for our kids...was sitting that length of time doing those tests. That really is a challenge, I mean if you ask them to set up an experiment, they will do it in a heartbeat, but because the test makes them sit for that length of time; that is the challenge for them.” Apparently, Seashore students overcame this challenge—on the most recent TAAS administration, 100 percent of students in two of the four reported grade levels passed both the reading and math subtests.

When questioned about the success of the school, board members and administrators say the support of the community is a key component. “Everyone is very passionate about their quality of life—about their family, about their children, about doing things the right way,” said one board member. “I think Seashore is just a fine example of that.”

Campus Accountability Rating	
2000	Recognized
2001	Recognized
2002	Exemplary

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

	TAAS Percent Passing					
	TAAS Reading			TAAS Math		
	2000	2001	2002	2000	2001	2002
Grade 3	85.7	91.7	90.5	71.4	83.3	76.2
Grade 4	100.0	100.0	100.0	93.8	78.9	90.9
Grade 5	94.7	100.0	100.0	95.2	100.0	100.0
Grade 6	94.7	100.0	92.9	100.0	94.1	100.0

Source: AEIS reports.

# 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."

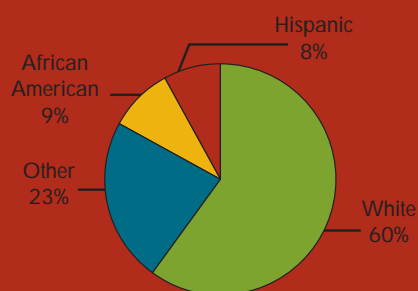
Since the school's founding in 1996, North Hills has grown from 218 students in grades 5 through 8 to 799 students across grades 1 through 12 in 2001–02. To accommodate the expansion, North Hills became the first charter school in the country to purchase property through the sale of tax-exempt bonds. 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

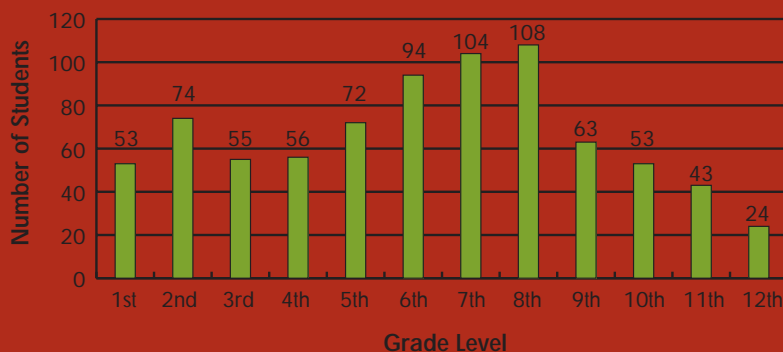
Most of The North Hills School's students are White (59.7 percent) or Asian (22.8 percent). Others are African American (9.0 percent), Hispanic (8.1 percent), and Native American (0.4 percent). A limited number of students are economically disadvantaged (1.6 percent) or limited English proficient (1.1 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."

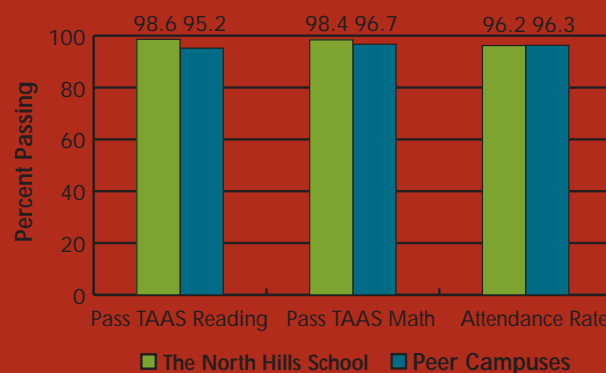
Communicating with parents about student progress is important at North Hills. Teachers frequently contact parents by e-mail and telephone and conduct parent-teacher conferences twice each year. Middle and upper school students receive guidance through the advisory program. In addition, administrators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

# 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.

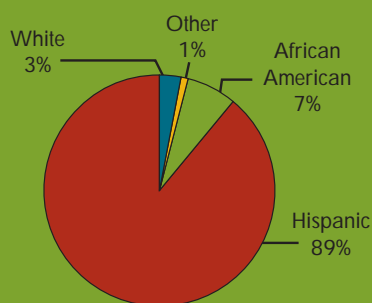
### Student Characteristics

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.<sup>2</sup> 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.

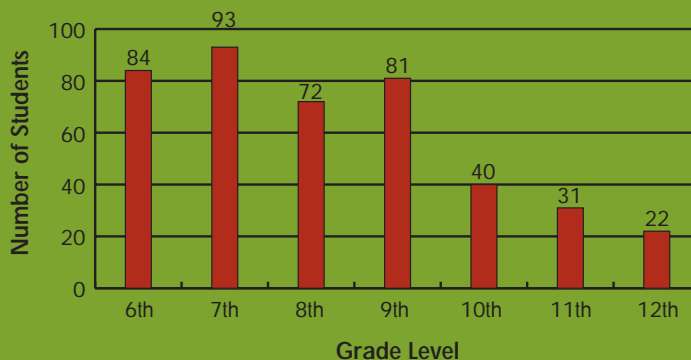
Students, according to faculty, are dedicated and willing to work beyond the minimum to achieve

<sup>2</sup>The 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.”

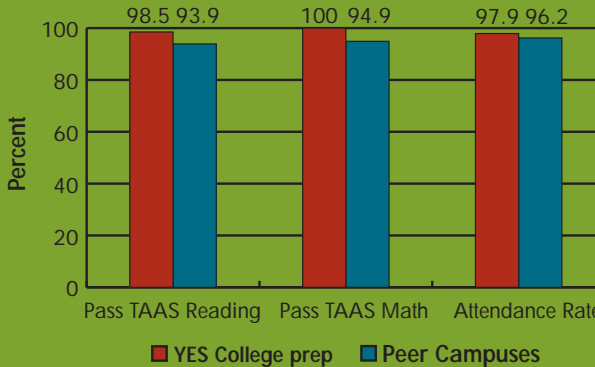
**Parental Involvement**

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.

# Focus Learning Academy

## DALLAS

Focus Learning Academy, an open-enrollment charter school serving elementary and middle school students in southwest Dallas, is dedicated to helping children with learning differences such as attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder, dyslexia, and other reading difficulties. The school's mission is "to provide a multi-sensory teaching approach to instruction that respects academic differences among children" so that students can develop learning skills, experience success daily, attain critical thinking skills, and "impact the future of our world." Although the school specializes in helping children with learning differences, they work with all children.

The school was established to fulfill the vision of Leroy McClure, the school's founder (who is also the school's chief executive officer and serves as the superintendent). After watching his brother struggle through school with dyslexia and noting the staggering dropout and illiteracy rates among African Americans, the superintendent felt called to assist nonaffluent students with learning challenges who otherwise might not receive help.

After receiving an open-enrollment charter in 1998, Focus Learning Academy opened with only 177 kindergarten through sixth-grade students. Currently, the school is housed in two Dallas churches with kindergarten through grade 3 at its Concord campus and grades 4 through 8 at its

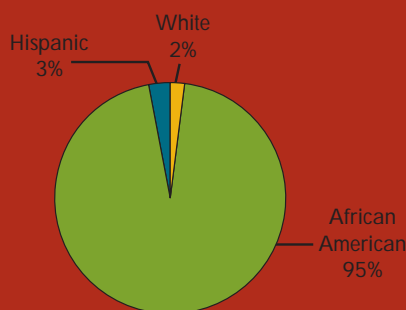
Laureland campus. Through a Texas Education Agency renovation grant, the charter school plans to purchase and move into a permanent building in summer 2003.

### Student Characteristics

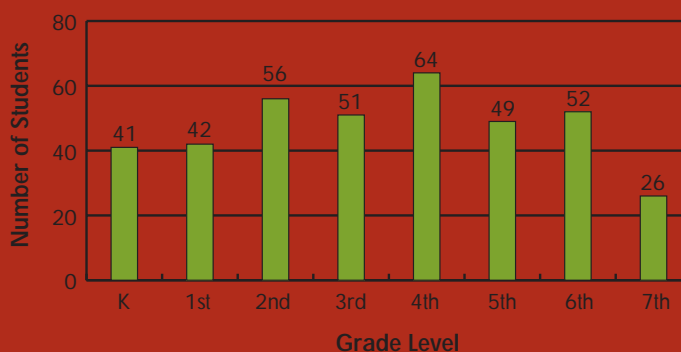
In the 2001–02 school year, Focus Learning Academy enrolled 381 students in kindergarten through grade 7. Almost all of the students attending this school are African American (95 percent), and half (49.9 percent) are economically disadvantaged. Approximately one-third of students (39 percent) are served in the school's special education program.

Educators at Focus Learning Academy believe its students are motivated to work hard. According to the school's assistant superintendent of instruction, parent communication is key. Educators work to increase parent and student "buy in" by helping parents "understand the critical nature of the teaching and learning that must take place." According to one teacher, "We explain that we have to work and don't have time for discipline." Through monthly meetings, parents are shown what students will be learning, so they can help them at home. The school held a mandatory session for parents of children who needed tutoring to brief them on the history of the Texas

Student race/ethnicity: AEIS 2001–02



Student Enrollment in Focus Learning Academy: AEIS 2001–02



Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS) and to give them the opportunity to take a mock TAAS test. After that, the assistant superintendent noted, “They made sure those kids were there because we had raised their level of awareness.”

## School Characteristics

Student enrollment at Focus Learning Academy varies across grade levels, with the lowest number in the recently added seventh grade. Students attend school from 8 a.m. to 3 p.m. and have tutorials available before and after school. The student attendance rate at this school (96.7 percent) is higher than the state average (95.5 percent).

The majority of teachers have degrees (91.9 percent), and some (8.1 percent) have advanced degrees. To join the faculty, teachers must agree to become certified in the school’s alphabetic phonics program. Some teachers work simultaneously on Texas teacher certification and alphabetic phonics certification. In addition to campus training, teachers attend workshops at the regional education service center and read three books a year related to their teaching area. Administrators formally evaluate teachers twice a year and conduct periodic, focused walkthroughs. In addition, the alphabetic phonics coordinator evaluates teachers’ implementation of the school’s phonics program. Class sizes range from 15 to 17 students, with an overall student-to-teacher ratio of about 11 to 1.

Educators appreciate the school’s small classes, family environment, alphabetic phonics program, and focus on the students. One teacher said, “I feel like I can reach the child.” Staff cite a lack of resources, especially in terms of space and materials, along with limited manpower (i.e., not having a duty-free lunch or



substitutes when a teacher is absent), as challenges. The assistant superintendent described the limited resources as a “culture shock” compared to resources at a previous school district. For example, the Laureland campus has only 15 computers in a computer lab and one computer in the teacher workroom; there are no computers in the classrooms. She points out: “The results that we achieved...we did it on a shoe string budget. We had nothing... but a commitment, determination, and a team spirit.”

Educators and students speak proudly of the committed, caring teachers. One teacher said, “I think we have a super staff here.” Similarly, the assistant superintendent spoke of the teachers’ commitment— “They hit the ground running. The school day starts at 8:00...By 8:01, they are on it...If Johnny comes in at 8:30, he has missed 29 minutes of solid instruction.” She further notes that teachers know they do not “have any time to waste.” Students believe teachers “really care,” help all students learn, make learning fun, are knowledgeable, and are good with discipline.

Teachers value the leadership of their administrators and believe administrators work collaboratively with them. One said, “We have an administration concerned about teachers.” Another stated, “I feel comfortable that I can go and share...with the next person in command, that they’re going to give me some

### School Characteristics

Founded	1999
Grades	K to 7
Enrollment	381
Daily schedule	8 a.m. to 3 p.m.
Days of instruction	175
Student attendance rate	96.7%
Student dropout rate	0.0%

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

### School Staffing

Number of teachers	35.6
Number of instructional aides	0.0
Student-teacher ratio	10.7 to 1
Beginning teachers	2.7%
Teachers with 1-5 years experience	56.8%
Teacher average years experience	7.1
Teacher turnover rate	21.4%
Teachers with no degree	8.1%
Teachers with advanced degrees	8.1%
Average teacher salary	\$33,097
Average campus administrator salary	\$57,500
Average central administrator salary	\$99,999

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

type of feedback.” Teachers and students are supported through the superintendent, assistant superintendents of instruction and operations, campus principals, special education director, a speech/language pathologist, two language therapists, and two campus-level special education coordinators.

Principals take the role of “instructional leader” seriously. They set high expectations for teachers and students, communicate assessment results, teach mini-lessons, purchase instructional materials, ensure students receive proper nourishment during the day, and make sure the parents and community are involved. The assistant superintendent of instruction, who also serves as the interim principal at the Laureland campus, talks of a “very calculated and deliberate approach” when making decisions about staff development or meeting individual teacher needs.

Teachers work collaboratively and provide input through weekly staff meetings and grade-level team meetings. Teachers at each grade level have common planning periods and meet to conduct grade-level planning and to share ideas and concerns. Teachers also serve on committees that develop policies and procedures for the school, including the staff development committee, campus improvement committee, and sunshine committee.

## Educational Program

Focus Learning Academy’s curriculum is the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). They use curriculum guides developed by the Charter School Resource Center and use textbooks along with other

resources to ensure all of the TEKS are covered. To meet students’ varied learning needs, teachers implement visual, auditory, and kinesthetic strategies to help students move from concrete to abstract understanding of concepts. Educators are creating new guides to align the curriculum with the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS).

In addition to the core curriculum, students with reading challenges complete a three-year alphabetic phonics program. The program is based on Orton-Gillingham instructional techniques and research done at Scottish Rite Hospital related to helping children with severe learning disabilities. The superintendent describes the program as “sequential, very structured, cumulative, multisensory, and repetitive.” Educators view the program as innovative in meeting students needs. One teacher stated: “That’s a tool that has been really positive...I call it my foundational tool, and if a child is lacking literacy, it really promotes that.” All of the school’s teachers complete the three-year certification requirement to use the program. Through the training, teachers learn philosophies and concepts related to working with learning challenged children as well as how to teach students to read.

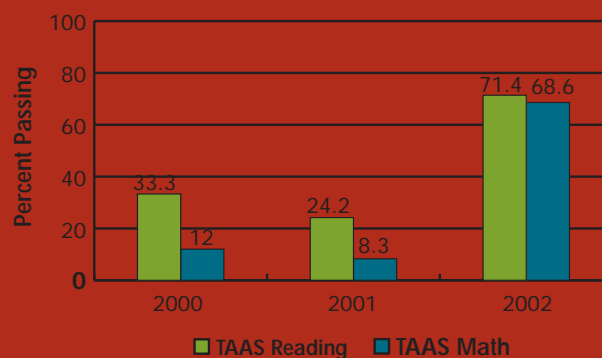
Ongoing assessment is important at Focus Learning Academy. Students complete a battery of tests when they first arrive, including an alphabetic phonics test, the Stanford Achievement Test, and Woodcock Johnson. Based on the test results, students’ strengths and weaknesses are identified. A personalized education plan is developed for each student, with strategies that will be used to address the weaknesses. In addition, students complete benchmark alphabetic phonics tests, TAAS benchmark tests, and the state standardized assessments.

## School Finance

Per-pupil expenditure	\$7,744
Per-pupil for instruction	\$4,412
Local revenue	6%
State revenue	83%
Federal Revenue	12%

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

TAAS Passing Rates for Focus Learning Academy: AEIS 2001–02



Students' progress on assessments is discussed during January parent-teacher conferences.

Extracurricular student activities at Focus Learning Academy include football, basketball, volleyball, cheerleading, chess club, newspaper club, and career investigation.

Focus Learning Academy enforces its discipline management plan and provides in-school suspension and counseling, if needed. Staff members work to build relationships with parents so they can jointly help students with problems. Also, they strive to help students know they care about them. Due to learning difficulties and the frustration that comes with them, the superintendent notes that many students arrive at school with attitude problems. However, he says, "We earn their respect. We don't demand it. All of a sudden that attitude leaves and learning starts."

### Parental Involvement

Educators and students report "strong parent support" at Focus Learning Academy. One teacher noted, "We have parental support that other schools lack." Teachers believe the school's "effective parent-teacher communication," along with parent "follow through" in working with students at home and ensuring that they attend tutorials, benefits students. Parent volunteers also make copies, read to children, tutor, help with programs, bring supplies, organize parties, go on field trips, and cover for teachers.

### Governance

The school's seven-member governing board promotes the school's mission and provides oversight for school

operations and financial management. The board also evaluates the superintendent. Through monthly meetings with clearly defined agendas, the board stays apprised of the school's academic plan, capital campaigns, and fund raising for facilities. They also receive updates from school administrator meetings. Board members, who have different professional backgrounds and varying levels of experience, view board members' diversity and dedication to the school's vision as important strengths. As stated by one board member: "One of our greatest strengths is our diversity...we come from a little bit different backgrounds, but we have a common cause."

### Accomplishments

Focus Learning Academy received a Commended rating in 2002 through the state's alternative education accountability system. The percentages of students passing the TAAS reading and math subtests grew substantially in 2002, with rates for reading and math increasing 47 and 60 percentage points, respectively. Educators credit the school's success to commitment, determination, teamwork, small-class size, flexible grouping, academic interventions, and the alphabetic phonics program. The superintendent attributes TAAS improvement to hiring the assistant superintendent of instruction, an outstanding leader with public school administration background, and implementing a plan she developed to increase student achievement. The assistant superintendent cites six areas that contributed to the increase in students' TAAS scores: strong instructional leadership, diagnostic assessment, staff development, research-based instruction, instructional intervention, and progress monitoring.

Campus Accountability Rating	
2000	No Rating: New
2001	Low-Performing
2002	AE: Commended

Source: 2001-02 AEIS report.

	TAAS Percent Passing					
	TAAS Reading			TAAS Math		
	2000	2001	2002	2000	2001	2002
Grade 3	20.0	22.7	41.4	18.2	0.0	23.1
Grade 4	20.0	23.1	85.2	0.0	5.9	79.3
Grade 5	44.4	15.8	78.3	11.1	5.0	78.3
Grade 6	N/A	41.7	85.7	N/A	30.8	92.9
Grade 7	N/A	N/A	75.0	N/A	N/A	66.7

Source: AEIS reports.

# John H. Wood Charter School

## SAN ANTONIO

Three seemingly simple rules form the backbone of John H. Wood Charter School's educational philosophy—be here, be kind, do your work. Founded in 1997 by sponsoring entity Educational Resource Center, John H. Wood serves a diverse population of at-risk students. Located within the Campbell A. Griffin Residential Treatment Center in San Antonio, the school primarily serves the educational needs of adjudicated, residential students receiving treatment for emotional or behavioral issues. The vision of the school is to “provide the environment in which the students are encouraged to develop their intellectual, linguistic, social, emotional, civic, and physical abilities.” “The ultimate goal,” as stated on the school's Web site, “is the transition and integration of these students into society capable of full participation in the process of family, employment, and community.” For the schools administrators, teachers, and students, the three rules—be here, be kind, do your work—represent important steps to achieving this goal.

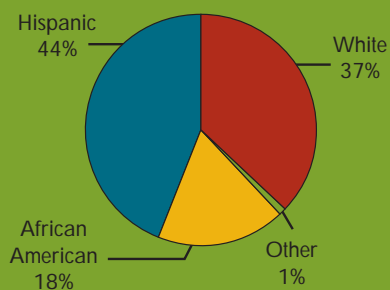
### Student Characteristics

In 2001–02, John H. Wood Charter School enrolled 135 students in grades 6–12. These students represent a variety of ethnicities and life cir-

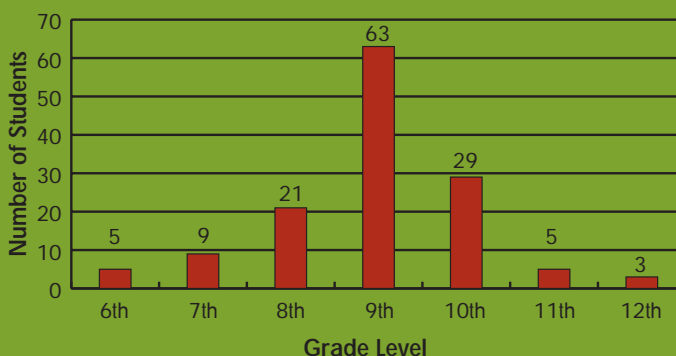
cumstances. Ethnically, the student population closely mirrors state averages with the majority of students being either Hispanic (44 percent) or White (37 percent). The school serves a slightly higher than average percentage of African American students (18 percent) as compared to the state as a whole (14 percent).

The vast majority of John H. Wood students (93 percent) are classified as economically disadvantaged and most (84 percent) qualify for special education services. Because most students enroll in the school upon entering the treatment center and typically only stay six to nine months, the school's mobility rate is very high (93 percent). In addition to economic factors, many students have also experienced other circumstances that put them at risk. Some of these students are ordered into treatment by the court and many have been assigned to child protective services due to abuse or neglect. In short, these students, as the superintendent describes, “Don't trust adults...[they] have no history that suggests that they should.” Complying with the first rule—be here, present, and alert—is a significant accomplishment. The superintendent explains this saying, “To be here, for a child that is depressed and suicidal and would much rather be left alone in a dark space, that's a major rule.” Thus, once in the classroom, students are not allowed to sulk in the corner but must “be here” physically and mentally.

Student race/ethnicity: AEIS 2001–02



Student Enrollment in John H. Wood Charter School: AEIS 2001–02



## School Characteristics

Although located within the treatment center facility, the school operates on a typical 8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m. schedule. Residential students simply walk downstairs from the facility's living quarters to attend classes. Due to laws related to the treatment center, boys and girls are separated. Classes are based on an accelerated block schedule covering the four core subject areas in nine-week grading periods. The school has a very low dropout rate (0.4 percent), due in part, administrators explain, to a concerted effort to track students who leave the school. In the past two years, the school has been able to track most of the students leaving the school and found that many were enrolled in other schools, explained the superintendent.

John H. Wood Charter School's administrative structure is fairly simple. The superintendent is the primary school leader and is supported by an instructional programs coordinator who offers support and leadership related to any aspect of instruction, including elements such as special education and testing. In addition, a principal provides on-site campus leadership. The director of business development works on issues related to the school's funding sources and purchases.

According to AEIS reports, John H. Wood employs two teachers and 17 educational aides. These two "teachers of record" handle many of the administrative and special education duties while working in the classroom on a limited basis. The 17 "educational aides" work with students on a daily basis, with approximately half being teachers and half working as assistants. Interviews with these teachers indicate



that many are degreed and certified and have experience in traditional public school or alternative school settings.

A variety of professional development activities are made available to John H. Wood teachers throughout the year. Administrators report that early release days and staff development days are incorporated into the school schedule. The superintendent explains that although the teachers regularly participate in professional development needs assessments, many times the assessments identify the same areas teachers have already chosen for staff development. Recent professional development topics mentioned by administrators and teachers include behavior management, differentiated instruction, writing, and crisis intervention. A number of teachers also reported participating in graduate courses or specialized certification courses (e.g., special education) prompted by their experience at the school. Due to the student population the school serves, special emphasis is placed on behavior management strategies. The superintendent described a professional development session led by a leading consultant in behavior management that was particularly effective in helping teachers understand the use of positive affirmation techniques.

### School Characteristics

Founded	1997
Grades	6 to 12
Enrollment	135
Daily schedule	8 a.m. to 3:30 p.m.
Days of instruction	180
Student attendance rate	97%
Student dropout rate	0.4%

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

### School Staffing

Number of teachers	2
Student-teacher ratio	not reported
Beginning teachers	0%
Teacher average years experience	9.5
Teacher turnover rate	83%
Teachers with no degree	0%
Teachers with advanced degrees	100%
Average teacher salary	\$44,501
Average campus administrator salary	\$63,000
Average central administrator salary	\$55,000

Source: 2001–02 AEIS report.

John H. Wood administrators believe it takes a special kind of teacher to work with the at-risk, emotionally disturbed students that their school serves. The superintendent has primary responsibility for personnel decisions. In describing what he looks for when hiring a new teacher, the school's superintendent explains that there are certain qualities that distinguish some candidates from others:

I'm looking for the person who lowers their voice when everybody else is raising theirs, it's a disposition, it's a very secure person in their own right who doesn't get upset easily and then kind of transmits that calm and serenity to the children...the piece you can't teach is that personality, so that's the first factor that I look for.

Recognizing the unique challenges their teachers may face, school administrators require potential job candidates to observe classes for two days prior to the interview process. Administrators say this process helps candidates experience first-hand the school environment and make an informed decision as to whether they feel suited for a position. Additionally, all new teachers are paired with a more experienced teacher during their first year to introduce them to the school, its procedures, and regulations associated with the treatment center. Not surprisingly, many of the teachers at John H. Wood have previous experience working with at-risk students in a variety of contexts. Several teachers commented that they heard about the school through co-workers or friends and sought out a position because of their desire to work with at-risk students.

## Educational Program

The education program at John H. Wood Charter School is based on a one-room schoolhouse model. Each classroom is composed of approximately 16 students of varying age and grade levels (6–12) and two faculty members (one teacher, one assistant). With the exception of lunch and recreation time, for the most part, students remain in the same classroom with the same teacher each day. This atmosphere, as described by school administrators, is meant to approximate a family environment because most of these students have been separated from their families. Administrators also point out that this atmosphere encourages peer role modeling and tutoring.

A structured environment also plays a key role in John H. Wood's educational program. Administrators and teachers comment that the presence of a regular schedule with reliable expectations is crucial to these students in particular since many have not experienced a safe, predictable environment in the past. Although there are no formal class periods, most teachers establish a regular schedule for their classroom. Teachers describe a typical day as including time for work on assignments, journaling, regular breaks, individual reading (books or newspapers), recreation, and character or social skills activities.

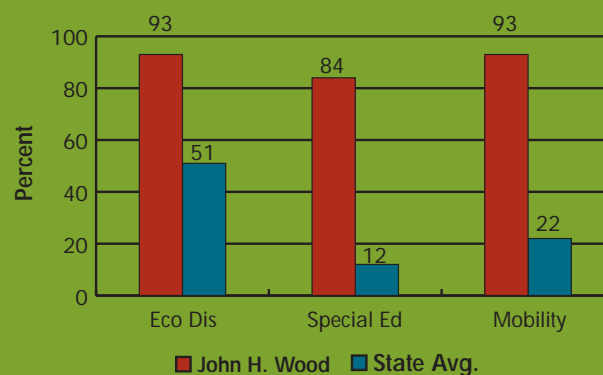
To accommodate the needs of 16 students of varying grade levels, teachers rely primarily on individual instruction. Upon entering the school, each student (regardless of special education status) is assessed and an individualized education plan (IEP) is created. Based on this plan, teachers give

### School Finance

Per-pupil expenditure	\$13,305
Per-pupil for instruction	\$6,705
Local revenue	0%
State revenue	95%
Federal revenue	5%

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

John H. Wood Charter School Student Characteristic: AEIS 2001–02



each student a set of core content-area assignments in an individualized folder. Students work on assignments of their choice, at their own pace, and there are no scheduled periods for specific subject areas. However, students are required to work on at least one assignment from each core area each day. Although teachers provide a limited amount of whole-group or small-group instruction, students primarily work individually with teachers answering their questions and guiding their progress on a one-on-one basis. Although each teacher sets specific guidelines for their classroom individually, most teachers establish goals for the number of assignments students complete in a day.

Most teachers explained that even though they do not regularly give students tests in the traditional sense, they are constantly monitoring students' progress. Teachers are expected to evaluate students' completed assignments and provide feedback within one day; they then instruct them on how to proceed with assignments. One teacher explained the process she uses: "On a daily basis, they turn their work in and as they turn their work in, I try and get it graded...it's like immediate feedback and what I do is look at each one of their books and I see exactly where they're at."

Teachers also use some formal assessments to monitor students' progress. Because many incoming students have not been enrolled in other schools consistently enough to have recent TAAS scores, the Comprehensive Learner Adapted Scope and Sequence (CLASS) test plays a key role in the school's educational program. Students take the test upon entering and the results inform the development of IEPs. Upon leaving John H. Wood (most students stay only six to nine months), students are assessed again to gauge the progress they

have made. Some teachers also use specific sections of the CLASS test to assess students' understanding of particular objectives or concepts.

Teachers believe that this high level of individual instruction is facilitated by the fact that there are two teachers in every classroom. While one teacher is technically a teaching assistant, the students are not aware of this distinction and are expected to treat them as equals. Teachers say they also collaborate with their assistants as equals. They believe that having two faculty members in the classroom is a great benefit to the students. "The thing I've found," comments one teacher, "is that everybody pretty much backs each other up...everybody's a teacher because everybody has something to bring to the table...where I can't reach one [student], my partner might be able to get to them, so that's what we do." This collaboration also extends outside the classroom. Teachers mentioned working with other classes on specific projects or allowing a student to work in another teacher's classroom if they needed a break from their own classroom.

Teachers also receive a great deal of support from staff members of the Campbell A. Griffin Residential Treatment Center. Treatment center staff members remain in the hallways of the school section to assist teachers with students if necessary. This assistance may range from simply talking with a student so he or she can return to the classroom, to intervening in ways that preclude an unsafe environment when a student is losing control. Additionally, as part of their treatment, most students have regular sessions with a therapist. These therapists, other treatment center staff, and teachers collaborate to reinforce consistent consequences and interactions with students.

*"The teachers are nice...they help you. They explain everything to you. If you don't understand it, they'll keep explaining."*

John H. Wood administrators believe that only when the first two rules—be here, be kind—are accomplished can productive learning in the classroom take place. Thus, in addition to their educational development, teachers also try to guide and support students' social development during their time at the school. Due to a history of abuse, neglect or other issues, many John H. Wood students have not had an opportunity to build positive personal or social interactions in the past. Teachers use programs such as Boy's Town or Character First to impart social skills such as respect, honesty, and integrity. Using videos, role-playing, and quizzes, teachers show students appropriate forms of social interaction that can be used both inside the classroom and in everyday society. The school also relies on a positive affirmation program to encourage appropriate behavior in the classroom. Students are presented with target positive behaviors to practice in the classroom, and the class is rewarded with points that earn incentives such as candy bars or pizza. Administrators and teachers comment that this positive approach, in contrast to more punitive strategies, has been a very successful disciplinary strategy and has encouraged a culture of positive peer pressure in the classroom. Teachers also note that when students are presented with appropriate and meaningful assignments that they can successfully complete, discipline problems tend to be infrequent.

Although they find working with at-risk students challenging, John H. Wood teachers emphasize that their job is also very rewarding. Many feel a great sense of satisfaction in seeing students progress both educationally and socially, despite their challenges or past experiences. "That's what

keeps me coming back," commented one teacher. "You know where these kids have been and yet they're willing to come into a classroom, be productive, even though they know they have all these strikes against them." Although John H. Wood teachers recognize the special needs of their students and the somewhat unique circumstances in which they teach, many see it simply as "just another opportunity to teach." Some teachers view their students' emotional and behavioral problems as an opportunity to grow and learn. Reflecting on this, one teacher said:

They're just children who have had tough lives and they've managed and I look at it this way—some of the things that they confide in you, I don't know if I would have made it as far as they have, so I look at that and to me that's a way to learn another approach, a way to learn another something to do for them, another way to learn a way to exalt them, to push them up so that they can do better.

## Governance

John H. Wood Charter School's governing board is composed of citizens from all walks of life. The current five-member board includes an accountant, a minister, a lawyer, a pediatrician, and a social worker/counselor. Several of the members have experience with at-risk students either through the juvenile justice system or the educational system. The board primarily oversees issues of policy and budgeting.

## Accomplishments

Although neither the setting nor the instructional methods are traditional, John H. Wood Charter School has experienced positive results. In one year, the school went from being classified as Low-Performing to a classification of Commended under Texas' alternative education accountability rating system.

TAAS results also indicate dramatic improvements during the past several years. The percentage of students passing all portions of the TAAS increased from 46 percent to 80 percent between 2000 and 2002. Results for individual subjects and grade levels are unavailable due to the small number of students tested. In addition, due to mobility and special education exemption, a significant number of students do not take the TAAS. For example, in 2002, 66 percent of John H. Wood students were tested and of those, 44 percent took the State-Developed Alternative Assessment (SDAA). The same year, 32 percent of students were exempt from testing based on their Admission, Review and Dismissal (ARD) committee recommendations.

Equally notable, according to teachers, is the personal and attitudinal progress that students make while at the school. Beyond test scores and passing rates, teachers point out that students leave with a new positive attitude about learning and confidence that they can succeed in school. One teacher described the changes he has seen:

To see some of them [students] come in, who haven't been in school for a year and a half or two years for whatever reasons, been bounced

from this placement to this placement, and to see them get that light in their eyes... 'Wow, I can do this.'

Administrators and teachers believe that this progress is due not only to the school's educational program but also to the safe, stable environment provided for the students. Staff members commented that most students had the academic ability all along but the combination of treatment center activities and the educational program helped to unlock their capabilities.

John H. Wood shows that simplicity can be an effective strategy to help students overcome difficult situations. Based on a foundation of three simple rules, the school relies on individual attention, structure, and caring teachers to help students progress educationally and discover the joy of learning once again. Administrators and staff believe that in experiencing educational success, these students begin to see beyond the difficult experiences that brought them to the school and look with confidence to a brighter future.

### Campus Accountability Rating

2000	Low-Performing
2001	Commended
2002	Commended

Source: AEIS report.

### TAAS Percent Passing

TAAS All Tests	
2000	46.2%
2001	83.3%
2002	80.0%

Source: AEIS reports.

Combined passing rates for grades 3–8 and 10.



Texas Center for Educational Research