



3 HISD schools sweep top spots

Motivating students key for campuses' rankings in top 10 list

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April 12, 2009, 12:07AM



Bill Olive For the Chronicle

Chucky Klapow, a choreographer at HISD's High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, leads a dance class. The school was ranked No. 3 on the Children at Risk list.

The best high schools in the greater Houston area are in the heart of the city and in the sprawling suburbs. The campuses are mammoth and modern in some cases, cramped and rundown in others. One school lies on a community college campus, while another holds classes in trailers.

But inside the walls of each of these schools, students from all walks of life are mastering the basics — reading, math, science and social studies — while taking more advanced courses and preparing for higher education.

Three high schools in the Houston Independent School District claimed the top spots in Children at Risk's annual list of the best public high schools in the area. Also in the top 10 are two schools in the Fort Bend ISD; one each in Alief, Katy and Spring Branch; another HISD school; and YES Prep's Southeast campus.

"In Houston, we have arguably some of the best high schools in the country," said Bob Sanborn, president and chief executive of Children at Risk. "But unfortunately, I still think there are many schools that have poor leadership, and superintendents in those districts need to pay attention."

Children at Risk, a Houston-based research and advocacy nonprofit, evaluated the high schools in

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eight local counties on various academic factors and provided its ranking of 131 campuses exclusively to the Chronicle for the third year in a row.

Among the top 10, half are speciality campuses — most with themes such as health professions or the arts — with fewer than 800 students who all chose to attend.

The three best schools, all in HISD, are Carnegie Vanguard, which caters to gifted and talented students, followed by DeBakey High School for Health

Professions and the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. Students must apply to enroll in these highly competitive schools.

“Although our students are very motivated, it takes a very dynamic staff to keep them motivated,” said Carnegie Principal Ramon Moss. The 390 or so students at Carnegie — who all had to meet academic entrance requirements — must take college-level Advanced Placement courses in English and history. By their senior year, most take four to six AP classes, and 100 percent took the SAT or ACT college-entrance exams, according to the most recent state data.

Giving up lunch time

Students at Carnegie praise the teachers for giving up their lunch or free periods to sponsor clubs the teens suggest, such as the puzzle club and a checkers-playing group. The school also has volleyball and soccer teams.

“If I had gone to a regular high school, I’m sure I would have done well, but I wouldn’t have had as much fun doing it, and I don’t think I would have had as many opportunities,” said Andrew DeRosa, a Carnegie senior who plans to attend Cornell University.

The other HISD campus in the top 10 is Challenge Early College, where students take high school and community college courses for credit. The majority of HISD’s high schools, however, ranked in the bottom half of the list.

“Most of these schools are doing better today than they were three years ago,” said HISD Superintendent Abelardo Saavedra, who noted that districts nationwide are struggling to improve their high schools. “We continue to lose a lot of kids.”

Four of the high schools in the top 10 are larger, traditional high schools in the suburbs. They have broad curriculums, competitive football teams and thousands of students, the majority from more affluent families.

“It’s what you do within the walls of the high school that matters,” said Louise Kennelly, a director at the federally funded National High School Center. “You can have rigorous, relevant instruction and meaningful relationships in large high schools. Certainly they exist.”

Take Spring Branch’s Memorial High School (No. 4), Katy’s Cinco Ranch (No. 6) and Fort Bend’s Clements (No. 5) and Austin (No. 10).

Clements Principal Kevin Moran said one key to

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success is making sure his 2,670 students are engaged — in their classes and in extra-curricular activities such as athletics, the arts or in one of 200 clubs. Twice a year, he said, he reviews data about student participation in these activities.

“Kids that are engaged in school and have ownership in school tend to perform better,” he said.

‘Independent learning’

At Alief ISD’s Kerr High School, ranked No. 9, students work at their own pace. Teachers typically hand out packets of assignments at the start of a week, set deadlines for completion and only lecture occasionally.

“A lot of it is independent learning,” said Zoya Hadi, a senior at Kerr, “but the teacher is always there. You can ask her as many questions as you need to.”

Admission into Kerr is based mostly on students’ behavior and attendance records, said Principal Raymond Lowery. Enrollment is about 760 this year.

YES Prep was the lone charter school to land in the top 10, at No. 7. About three-fourths of the students at YES come from low-income families, and before classes begin, the children and their parents sign a pact committing to hard work, plus a longer school day and year.

Richard Carmona, a junior at YES, transferred

from the Galena Park school district this year. He saw his cousin graduate from the charter school and go on to college and wanted to do the same. On his first day at YES, Carmona recalls noticing a big difference from his old high school, and it wasn’t the trailer classrooms.

“Here,” the 16-year-old said, “they have high expectations. They want us to go to college. They even give us opportunities to go and see what college is about.”

Carmona would be the first in his immediate family to attend college.

“At my old school, we would just go to class, maybe get a lecture for like 10 minutes and then get a worksheet. I would pretty much go to sleep in every class,” he said. “Coming here, we’re discussing, having to read books, taking midterms and tests. I realized there’s not any free time to sleep in class. “I’m challenged now. I’m not just chillin’ at school.”

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