



Top stories

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2 HISD magnet high schools rank in top 10

Nonprofit says both magnets are stellar, but 13 other campuses fall in bottom tier

By ERICKA MELLON

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High school Principal Herb Karpicke carries his secret, and admittedly strange, weapon whenever he visits classrooms.

The weapon, if you can call it that, is a triangle, and he forms it with his hands, touching together his thumbs and index fingers.

Really, the triangle is more of a symbol, a reminder that good teaching means teachers, students and instructional materials should be "engaged." In layman's terms, teachers shouldn't be sitting behind desks grading papers while students shuffle through their books and copy definitions.

Karpicke's rule might sound obvious, but it seems to be working. His campus, the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, is the best high school in the Houston area, according to an analysis by Children at Risk, a local research and advocacy group.

The nonprofit provided its second annual rankings of 97 public high schools to the Houston Chronicle. The rankings judged the schools on various data, including graduation rates and students' scores on the SAT college-entrance exam, Advanced Placement tests and the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

Schools with higher percentages of low-income students also received more points, based on research that shows they generally enter school further behind.

Still, high schools in the area's more affluent suburbs fared well under the rankings. Every school in Katy and Cypress-Fairbanks, for example, finished in the top half.

Children at Risk highlighted the 10 best campuses, and then divided the others into tiers, with one being the best and four the worst.

The researchers concede that no ranking system is perfect — for instance, some magnet schools can be more selective in choosing students, which can give them an advantage over neighborhood campuses. But the researchers hope their list sparks more than debate. They hope it prompts schools to get better.

"It's nice to honor these very best schools," said Bob Sanborn, the president and chief executive officer of Children at Risk, "but I think the really sad story is all these schools that are doing our children a very bad disservice by not being good enough."

What makes a top school?

The Houston Independent School District has two magnet schools on the 10-best list: the High School for the Performing and Visual Arts and DeBaKey High School for Health Professions, which ranked fourth. (Both schools have entrance criteria, but only DeBaKey's is based on academics; students must audition for HSPVA.)

More HISD schools — 13 of 29 — were ranked in the bottom tier than any other. All of those schools are neighborhood campuses. Katy and Fort Bend each had two schools in the top 10, and YES Prep's southeast campus was the only state charter school to rank among the best.

Karpicke, himself a violist, said HSPVA's emphasis on fine arts isn't its key to success. More

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important, he said, is that his teachers "know the triangle."

"HSPVA has great teachers, though a lot of schools have great teachers," he said. "I think the difference is, our great teachers actually are teaching, and that unfortunately seems to be rarer and rarer these days. For whatever reason, I think teachers tend not to do the kinds of things they know will work with children."

Traditional schools

The school, where students spend three hours a day dancing, playing music or performing, also graduated a rare 91 percent of its students on time in 2005, according to the Children at Risk calculation.

"I never thought I would drop out because I knew I wanted to go to college," said Erica Soto, a senior. "But I do feel more motivated to go to school when theater isn't just an elective."

Most of the high schools in the top 10 are more traditional. They are large, with thousands of students, and comprehensive; they don't have magnet programs or special academies.

"There's not one high school that has a magic wand that makes it all happen," said Mike Leach, the principal of the traditional Stephen F. Austin High School in Fort Bend County, which ranked 10th.

Most of the top schools have another similarity: They serve relatively few poor children. DeBakey and YES Prep are the exceptions.

Struggling charter schools

Chris Barbic, the founder of YES Prep Public Schools, attributes his students' success to a longer school day and to the quality of the teachers, who, unlike those at the other top-performing schools, are mostly young and inexperienced.

"These are mission-driven folks who believe in what we're trying to do in getting low-income kids through college," Barbic said of his staff.

The other charter schools included in the rankings landed near the bottom. Though many charters are at a disadvantage because they serve particularly at-risk students, some are just doing a bad job, Sanborn said.

In last place: Alphonso Crutch's Life Support Center, a small state charter school in Houston that serves mostly low-income black and Hispanic students.

Only 10 percent of the students who entered as freshmen graduated from there in 2005, the rankings show, and no students attempted Advanced Placement exams.

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'No choice'

Deborah Gaddis, the school's principal, blames the traditional public schools for failing the students first.

"The lowest rank should be given to the ISDs because we accept their students who come in here in the 10th grade and cannot read or do math," Gaddis said. "No one tells you that side of the story."

Desire to improve

All four Pasadena high schools rank in the lowest third. And nearby Channelview High School also is struggling to educate its students, Sanborn said.

"Channelview High School — there's a district that's undergoing enormous growth, especially Latino


growth," he said. "This is a working-class neighborhood, and here we are completely underserving these kids."

Laurie Bauer, the principal of Channelview High School, said the school has started several programs to help all its students improve, including SAT and ACT preparation classes, tutorials and a special project for recent immigrants that allows them to boost their English skills while assisting in pre-K classrooms.

Sanborn, though drawn to the bottom of the list, said parents should look to the top and ask, "How do I get my high school to be that good?"

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