

Star-Telegram

H-E-B district's road map has clear-cut goals in mind

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HURST -- In Kari Challgren's first-grade classroom, students are in charge.

With Challgren's help, the students at Harrison Lane Elementary School set goals, discuss how to achieve them and create weekly action plans. On a recent afternoon, they brainstormed ways to learn 3-D shapes, agreeing to go on shape hunts at school and home to identify the shapes of everyday objects like canned foods.

"Kids need to be responsible for their own learning and take ownership over learning," said Challgren, who is in her ninth year of teaching. "It is amazing to watch these kids learn and grow, and they did it all on their own."

Challgren's approach is part of a strategy at Hurst-Euless-Bedford schools to empower students, improve test scores and close the achievement gap that frequently plagues low-income and minority children.

The strategy has paid off. At Harrison Lane, three-quarters of students are considered economically disadvantaged, yet last year the school received the state's highest ranking of exemplary.

Similar success stories are found across H-E-B, where nearly half of all students are economically disadvantaged. Test scores have improved in every school. Innovative programs and a variety of language courses, including Hindi, Chinese and Arabic, continue to draw students. H-E-B has earned the state's second-highest rating, recognized, outperforming other Northeast Tarrant County school districts with similar or far less challenging demographics.

Education experts have taken notice.

The District Management Council, a Boston organization that provides advice and support to a network of public schools, published a case study in its journal this year examining H-E-B's progress.

Education Resource Group, which ranks Texas school districts based on how well they convert resources such as tax dollars into academic outcomes, has ranked H-E-B No. 1 among large school districts for five years.

"H-E-B is a very balanced, strong district," said Tim Tauer, the company's chief operating officer. "It's not Carroll or Highland Park. It has some challenging demographics, but it is able to deal effectively with those challenges."

How did the district achieve such strides?

"There is no silver bullet," Superintendent Gene Buinger said. "We created a road map and we stick to it. We work with each individual student. We set high expectations, and we push hard."

Setting goals

As part of its road map, in 2004 the district adopted Continuous Improvement, a model long used by businesses that emphasizes relying on research and data to make decisions.

Nearly every student in H-E-B maintains a data folder with individual test scores, goals and action plans. At the beginning of the year, each class sets a mission statement. Teachers give frequent quizzes or tests, and students track their progress on charts and graphs.

Schools celebrate success.

In Challgren's first-grade classroom, rewards have included dance parties with Justin Bieber songs, lunch in the school garden or an hour of barefoot time in class. Every six weeks, the entire school gathers for rowdy pep rallies to cheer for academics.

"We do whatever it takes to motivate and engage our students," Principal Donna Stevens said. "We have to show them that learning is fun."

Also in 2004, H-E-B established a set of core messages. The first -- students are responsible for their own learning -- has become a districtwide mantra.

This month, students at Shady Oaks Elementary in Hurst led their parent-teacher conferences, sharing information with their parents on classroom expectations, goals, progress and plans.

Sarah Miller, an eighth-grade science teacher at Harwood Junior High in Bedford, sets goals for her students but allows them to decide how they want to achieve them. Some students prefer to work in groups; others want to work by themselves with books or use the computer.

"They have a voice and a say in how they learn, and that empowers them to make good decisions," Miller said. "My students are more focused and driven than they used to be."

Test scores prove that. When Buinger introduced Continuous Improvement, H-E-B had no exemplary-rated schools. Today, there are nine.

Last school year, 181 schools in Tarrant County failed to make adequate yearly progress under the federal No Child Left Behind Act, which aims to have 100 percent of students proficient in math and reading by 2014.

H-E-B, Carroll and Aledo were the only Tarrant County districts in which all schools met the accountability standards.

In H-E-B, about half of the more than 20,000 students are considered economically disadvantaged.

In Aledo and Carroll, the percentages are 11.9 and 1.7, respectively.

Innovative courses

Curriculum goes beyond math, science and reading. Students as young as 5 can sign up to play the violin or another instrument in Suzuki Strings. A Spanish immersion program begins in the first grade. Core Knowledge, which emphasizes a classic liberal-arts education, was integrated into the standard curriculum at all 19 elementary schools after it proved popular at a handful of schools. Beginning in the seventh grade, students can take Arabic, Hindi or Mandarin Chinese.

H-E-B offers innovative programs not only to give students a well-rounded education, but also to keep and lure families in the competitive Northeast Tarrant education market.

"There is not a bad district in Northeast Tarrant County," Buinger said. "We know that our families have choices, and we have to perform well and offer unique programs."

Higher expectations do bring longer hours and more stress, teachers and principals say.

When Hurst Junior High introduced Continuous Improvement, many teachers balked, Principal Lesli Guajardo said. But as more began incorporating the model into their lesson plans, they were swayed.

"Change can be hard for teachers, for anyone," Guajardo said. "But when they started seeing results and improvements, it became much easier to convince them it was worth it."

New teachers sign detailed documents that outline the district's goals and expectations. Still, not all teachers can manage the pressure. In an average year, district officials say, about 10 teachers resign because they cannot meet the district's expectations.

"We made the decision that we would deal with the difficult personnel issues and have tough conversations," Buinger said. "Without critical conversations, you get mediocrity."

At Hurst Junior High, which received a National Blue Ribbon award last year for its achievements among disadvantaged students, Guajardo said, change has been evident in student performance and behavior.

"This is not the same school it was 10 years ago," Guajardo said. "It's a different culture and climate. The expectations are different. Everyone is more driven."

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