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More high-poverty schools in San Antonio win 'gold ribbons'

Alia Malik and Ashley McBride Nov. 17, 2019

Children in the Monte Vista neighborhood, whose homes have an average taxable value of a half-million dollars, are zoned to attend Cotton Academy in the San Antonio Independent School District.

But for the most part, they don't. Almost 95 percent of Cotton students come from households west of the wealthy enclave, with low enough incomes to qualify for subsidized school meals.

Signs in the grass outside Cotton proclaim, "SAISD of course!" Inside, on the second floor, Kaitlyn Coronado's eighth-graders moved around their classroom last week, slyly seeking out their friends in a pairing-off that was supposed to be random.

"You have 45 seconds to explain what a Federalist is, and what they support, to your partner," Coronado said. "Go."

In ratings released Sunday, the Houston-based nonprofit Children at Risk gave Cotton's middle school grades a "gold ribbon" for high performance amid high poverty.

Principal Rawan Hammoudeh runs teacher training sessions herself, and when she meets with teachers every week to go over students' work, she doesn't want to hear that the kids started the year at low levels or with gaps in their knowledge.

"It's no excuses," she said.

Children at Risk was giving letter grades to schools, boosting those with higher standardized test scores than others at their socioeconomic level, for more than a decade before the Texas Education Agency last year adopted a similar method for its annual, high-stakes accountability ratings.

The nonprofit's weights and formulas remain more rigorous than the state's, and the group is pushing the TEA to adopt stricter standards. Starting this year, Children at Risk and the TEA have a data-sharing agreement that will enable the

nonprofit to release its ratings from the previous school year in the fall, instead of nearly a year after the school year ended.

San Antonio has more gold ribbon schools than ever before, said Bob Sanborn, president and CEO of Children at Risk. But so does the rest of the state, and according to the rankings,

he said.

“What we want to see is San Antonio residents push for more support for our schools, and also to do the things that other places in Texas are doing to make schools better,” Sanborn said.

Those things include expanding full-day, high-quality prekindergarten, extending hours in the school day and feeding students as much as possible, Sanborn said.

He credits SAISD Superintendent Pedro Martinez with adopting those strategies and others to improve the historically low-performing inner-city school system. Martinez has joined Sanborn in embracing letter grades for schools — alone among local superintendents, who consider them simplistic and too reliant on test scores. Increased scores in SAISD, the third-largest district in Bexar County with 48,000 students, have raised Children at Risk’s rankings for all of the county.

“This is not an overnight thing. This is something that’s going to be slow, because many districts in San Antonio have coasted for years,” Sanborn said. “We need to see all the districts sort of try to move in that right direction, but when it comes to low-income districts, we can’t be complacent. We have to be reform-minded in terms of trying new things.”

Something to prove

Cotton failed to meet state standards in 2016. The next school year, it kept its sixth-graders and began transitioning to an “academy” serving pre-kindergarten through eighth grade, one of a few elementary schools in the area that folded in junior high students as the nearby Twain Middle became a dual-language magnet school.

The state gave Cotton a “B” based on last year’s test scores, up from a “D” the year before.

When more than 7,000 school district employees gathered at the Alamodome to kick off the school year in August, the Cotton teachers sought out the superintendent.

“They demanded that I go see them because they wanted to show me their goals and that they were going to be an A school this year,” Martinez said. Conquered, he visited that afternoon.

The students all know the school’s goal, and they set individual goals for themselves and plan how to achieve them, Hammoudeh said.

The TEA’s letter grades are largely based on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness, but for her, achieving success means more than teaching to the test. The school has started to emphasize college readiness.

Teachers shake hands with each student as they enter the classroom, and students in turn are expected to shake hands with classroom visitors. “That’s a life skill they’re going to need,” Hammoudeh said.

Cotton’s attendance zone includes Alta Vista and part of Beacon Hill, both gentrifying neighborhoods, and an area along Hildebrand Avenue that gentrification hasn’t reached. It’s small, with only 140 middle-schoolers — the eighth grade was added only this year — which makes it easier for teachers to address students’ needs and build relationships, Hammoudeh said.

Alicia Hill, 14, has been going to Cotton since the first grade, except last year when she transferred to Whittier, a large traditional middle school. She transferred back.

“The teachers get more involved” at Cotton, Alicia said. Now in the eighth grade, counselors are helping her apply to Travis Early College High School and Fox Tech High School, which has health and pre-law magnet programs.

In the fourth grade, Alicia did a project about Central America, and has planned to travel there ever since.

Her classmate Nicholas Flores, 13, felt prepared for an upcoming debate about Federalism, the early U.S. political movement whose members, he explained, supported national government. He wore a green “Universita Roma” hoodie, for

the Sapienza University of Rome, which he got from his aunt. She attends the University of the Incarnate Word and he often walks around campus with her.

Students watch the news in social studies class and they've been learning about impeachment.

Middle-schoolers at Cotton play every possible sport: football, basketball, soccer, cross-country. Nicholas also plays percussion in the band and takes art class.

Each middle-schooler at Cotton has only two different teachers for core academic classes — no lockers or chaotic transitions between class periods.

"It's not really like a normal middle school," Nicholas said.

Last year, when Alicia and Nicholas' group was in seventh grade, one of their teachers went on maternity leave. Students started complaining to Hammoudeh — "You need to get rid of that sub," they told her. "It's poor quality teaching."

Hammoudeh switched the teacher.

"It's good that they advocate for themselves," she said. "A lot of times, our students aren't taught that they can."

Hammoudeh has been principal since January 2018 and now has an intern, Charlie Logan, a Trinity University graduate student, through a leadership development program with the university. As the area continues to gentrify, she thinks the school will attract more affluent families.

"Things are starting to change because people are starting to hear about Cotton," Hammoudeh said.

'The biggest thing'

No schools in Judson ISD made Children at Risk's last gold ribbon list in May — but on the latest list, Miller's Point Elementary School won the honor, propelled by an atmosphere of achievement built around parent, teacher and staff involvement.

On Thursday morning, a group of crafty fifth-graders were busy in the school's STEAM Lab, building with Legos, experimenting with electronic circuit boards, inflating balloons with straws and catapulting ping pong balls into paper cups.

Students explored, probed, and analyzed, fulfilling the lab's motto written on the board: "Above all else, try something!" The lab complements students' science and math lessons and allows for real-world application of their studies. Soon, staff will add a 3D printer to enrich geometry studies.

Noise in the room rose to a dull roar until a balloon popped, briefly spooking the class as two dozen eyes gazed towards the culprit. The room quieted for just a beat. "Be careful," said teacher Vickie Coleman, breaking the tension.

The school values teamwork, character and kindness, values that are reflected on classroom walls and in the hallways. It sits on a quiet street of two-story brick homes in Converse.

About three-quarters of its 556 students were economically disadvantaged last year, while about a third are transient and will move during the school year, Smejkal said. Children at Risk placed Miller's Point in its highest quartile for student mobility.

Along with students in military families, teachers in the military reserves are subject to active duty during the school year — it has happened twice this year — and must be covered by a substitute.

"We've got a good mixture of people, that's for sure. Which is nice, because then we serve everyone's needs," principal Barbara Smejkal said.

Miller's Point is the seventh-most economically disadvantaged of Judson ISD's 20 elementary schools, according to data from the 2018-2019 school year. But its TEA accountability score places it above 17 of those schools, including some with fewer disadvantaged kids.

One of Smejkal's first goals when she arrived in 2015 was to engage parents. There was no parent-teacher organization.

"As soon as you get parents involved, kiddoes get involved and it boosts their achievements," she said. "When you join a school, you're the person that's going to be making changes and of course you have to team-build to get everybody on the same path."

Smejkal required her teachers to host multiple parent-teacher conferences in the first semester and participate in the daily drop-off and pick-up, greeting parents

and family members. Teachers, staff and Smejkal herself ride buses home with students to meet and talk to parents, she said. Parents are also invited to help tutor students and monitor the hallways.

The character component in Miller Point's approach is highly visible. For five years, the school has had a kindness program, led by counselor Christine Parker. Students don bright orange shirts declaring "Kindness begins with me!" and work to instill it in themselves and others.

Teachers have pooled money to buy a student a pair of glasses or replace some clothes after a fire, Smejkal said. She's even accompanied a kid to the eye doctor to get glasses. "We're all a family and we help our families," she said.

The 25 students in Rebecca Morris's first grade class were divided into four groups for a reading workshop. Using sticky tabs, they marked charts, color, headings and large text throughout their workbooks to note "text features."

"We create relationships with our kids and their families. You might have some with no parental involvement. Some are really involved," Morris said.

"Relationships are the biggest thing we have going."

Beyond building relationships, Morris also works to build kindness and self-esteem in her 6- and 7-year-olds, which she demonstrated with a call-and-response.

"Boys and girls, you are all what?"

"Gifted!"

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