



Foundation for the Education of Young Women

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Irma Lerma Rangel Young Women's Leadership School in Dallas graduates its first class

By LAURIE FOX

They call themselves the "Elite 21."

The 21 young women who will graduate today from the state's first all-girls public school move and speak with a confident air.

The tight-knit sisterhood has carried the expectations of its community, its families and the school district on its shoulders since the school opened in 2004. Now, as the girls become the school's first graduates, everyone is watching to see how their futures will unfold.

The graduation marks a victory for the Irma Lerma Rangel Young Women's Leadership School, a college preparatory magnet near Fair Park. It began with only 124 students, a dozen teachers and one committed group of parents.

Today, several of the girls say they are deeply grateful for the confidence, opportunity and rigor the school provided them.

"We're the trailblazers," said Noni Thomas, 17. "We've set the tone and the tradition. Everyone learned from us. This school has instilled in us that we can do big things." She didn't always feel that way. When her mother dragged her out of bed to interview for the new school, Noni wanted no part of it. A school with no boys and required uniforms? Not happening. "I was determined to sabotage the interview," she said. "This was not where I wanted to be." But Noni's mother, Alpha Thomas, was undeterred. She exhaustively researched the new school and became convinced that the small class sizes, single sex and focus on college preparation and leadership skills were right for her daughter.

For admission, the girls are required to have a grade average of 80 or above. They submit letters of recommendation and graded work samples. They are also interviewed and take on-site math and writing assessments. The girls come from all over the city and are admitted based on academics, not income.

Noni plans to attend Mills College, a small liberal arts school in Oakland, Calif., this fall, majoring in math and dance with a minor in science. She was one of 1,000 students nationwide awarded a full college scholarship through the Gates Millennium Scholars Program.

Several of the school's seniors said they, too, initially balked at the same-sex environment and mandatory uniforms. But they said the school leaders put college in the front of their minds and removed "distractions" that exist at coed schools.

"If I don't want to deal with a boy or talk to him, I don't have to come to school and see him all day long," said Katie Peal, 17. "I have a lot of willpower and my attitude is great. I could focus on school."

The same-sex public school movement is growing in Texas and nationwide, according to the nonprofit National Association for Single Sex Public Education in Pennsylvania. In 2006, the U.S. Department of Education issued rules that make it easier to create such schools and classes. The association lists almost 100 schools nationwide that qualify as single-sex schools.

Irma Rangel – named for the first Texas House member of Mexican heritage – got its start with a push from the private sector. Philanthropist Lee Posey, the founder of Palm Harbor Homes, and his wife, Sally, wanted to create an all-girls school in DISD after visiting The Young Women's Leadership School of East Harlem.

Local district leaders wanted to provide options for motivated students, so the Poseys – through their nonprofit Foundation for the Education of Young Women – created a partnership with the district. The foundation now backs all four of the state's all-girls' public schools: Rangel, the Ann Richards School for Young Women in Austin, the San Antonio Young Women's Leadership Academy and the Lubbock School for Young Women Leaders.

The single-sex education group also lists three all-boys public schools in Houston. Dallas ISD plans an all-boys school to open in the 2011-12 school year.

Irma Rangel's principal Vivian Taylor, who has been with the school from its inception, knew that starting the district's first single-gender campus was a risk. Taylor left a stable environment at the highly rated DISD school Dealey Montessori to take the job. But she said she wanted to embark on something new, something innovative. "This was an experiment," she said. "People trusted us. DISD didn't know if it would work. It had to be successful. "But it did work. And if it can work in Dallas, it can work anywhere."

The students scored higher than the district average in every TAKS subject this year and all 21 graduating seniors are college bound. The real success of the school, officials say, will be measured over time, as Irma Rangel turns out more graduates and more grade levels take standardized tests. But in the school's first five years, the overall TAKS passing rates in all grades and all subjects are near or at 100 percent. School leaders now are focusing on improving commended scores, which means that the students only miss one or two questions on each test. This year, the girls scored 64 percent commended in reading, 51 percent commended in math, 91.9 percent commended in writing, 34 percent commended in science and 80 percent commended in social studies.

Taylor said the absence of boys is only one aspect of what makes Irma Rangel different. "We are building leaders, students who are ambassadors for the school," Taylor said. "These girls speak in front of large groups of people; they travel all over the area for community service projects."

Shabrona Peal wanted a different life for her two daughters. Her oldest daughter, Katie, will graduate from Irma Rangel this year. Her younger daughter will be in the ninth grade at the school in the fall. "I graduated high school and attended some college, but I got pregnant after high school," Peal said. "There is so much more out there than getting pregnant and fast-food jobs." Saul Castillo knew early on that his daughter, Tarcila, could excel at computers. He said her being named valedictorian is a testament to how the school helped shape a good student into a great one. Tarcila, 18, will attend Southern Methodist University in the fall, majoring in computer engineering and math.

"At their age, there's always something that can pull their attention," her father said. "With an all-girls' school, the focus is on being in school."