



Foundation for the Education of Young Women

Star-Telegram

Young leader eager to make first impression as principal at all-girls school

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BY EVA-MARIE AYALA

Mia Hall always dreamed of being just like Clair Huxtable — the no-nonsense attorney who also ran a house full of children on *The Cosby Show*.

But while attending law school in Fort Worth, she fell in love with a substitute teaching job.

"I just wasn't looking forward to going to law school anymore," Hall said. "But I was excited each day I got to go teach. I just felt like I was making a difference."

Hall, 31, eventually became a teacher and school administrator. Now her house full of children will be all girls. Hall will be the first principal of the Fort Worth school district's new girls school scheduled to open next year.

The school, at what used to be the Adult Education Center on West Magnolia Avenue, will serve about 150 sixth- and seventh-graders next year and add a grade a year until the 12th grade. Coursework at the school will emphasize math and science and focus on developing leadership qualities, officials said.



Making decisions

Hall is juggling dozens of decisions for the new school.

What kind of uniforms? What will the school colors be? Mascot? How to offer sports?

"You only get one chance to make a first impression, and you can't ignore anything," Hall said.

"The success of the school will depend on how the students feel about the school and how the staff feels about the school."

Hall grew up in Arlington and graduated from Lamar High School. She attended the University of Texas at Austin and then Texas Wesleyan School of Law.

Her first education job was teaching social studies at J.P. Elder Middle School. After three years, she moved up to assistant principal at Eastern Hills High School. In 2008, she was appointed principal of the Center for New Lives, a campus for pregnant or parenting teens.

Elda Gonzalez was the principal who hired her at Elder. She said she has been impressed in following Hall's career.

"She's very mature for her age and has that leadership quality that just stands out," Gonzalez said. "She's moved up the ranks fast because she's very confident. She puts a lot of thought into a decision and takes a lot of input from people to make the right decision."

Deputy Superintendent Pat Linares said Hall has done a remarkable job of bringing the new school together.

"She is setting out what she wants to have at the school and setting goals so that the young women are taught to be true leaders," Linares said.

Criteria for success

The bar for all-girls schools in Texas has been set high.

Such schools in Dallas, San Antonio, Austin and Lubbock have been earning the top two state ratings of exemplary or recognized for academics.

But success isn't as simple as putting girls on one campus and boys at another, said Leonard Sax, founder of the National Association for Single-Sex Public Education and the author of *Why Gender Matters*.

"It's not successful unless teachers have training because girls and boys learn very differently," Sax said.

And when girls are on a campus without boys, "they tend to be more motivated and think that it's cool to be smart, which is harder to do in a coed school," Sax said.

The country has at least 547 schools offering some form of single-gender opportunities, according to Sax's association.

Fort Worth is opening its school with help from the New York-based Young Women's Leadership Foundation, which provided some seed money and will help with training staff. The foundation worked with the other Texas districts to establish their schools. The Dallas-based nonprofit Foundation for the Education of Young Women is giving the district \$250,000 a year for four years to help establish the school.

Hall, who visited two of the New York foundation's schools, said traditional gender roles are quickly erased when girls are amongst themselves.

"They are focused and take risks and challenge themselves," she said.

Fort Worth officials are exploring the funding, facilities and other resources necessary to offer an all-boys campus as well. Trustees had planned to open a separate girls and boys academy at Polytechnic High School if the school was shut down by the state. But Poly students made dramatic gains on state tests and so the school remains open.

Linares visited an all-boys school in New York and said she was blown away.

"They were the nicest bunch of young gentlemen I've ever met," she said. "They had town-hall meetings, were focused. This is something we'd like to do in a few years."

Mia Hall Age: 31

Residence: Fort Worth

Occupation: Principal of the Fort Worth district's new all-girls school, which opens next year

Background: Hall has a bachelor's degree from the University of Texas at Austin and a master's degree from the University of Texas at Arlington. She was a child-abuse investigator in Johnson County before beginning her education career. She taught at J.P. Elder Middle and served as assistant principal at Eastern Hills High before becoming the principal at the Center for New Lives in 2008. She is married with a young son.

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