

Ann Richards school has successful first year

Despite rocky start, Austin district's only all-girls' school shines on state achievement tests

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Students at the Ann Richards school celebrated the last day of school with the same enthusiasm as youths at other Austin middle schools. But here — where the talk is mostly focused on the characters in the teen-lit series *Twilight* and, according to her math teacher, one girl is so in love with the subject that her boyfriend may as well be a trapezoid — the exuberant high-fives, memories captured in the pages of the yearbook and departing hugs were just between girls.

The Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders, the Austin school district's first foray into single-sex education, is beaming after posting some of the district's highest passing rates on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills in only its first year of operation — making it, to single-sex education proponents, another example of how the model can work.

And despite a rocky start, during which several girls left, school officials proudly say, several strong traditions and a unique culture have taken hold. "If you'd have asked me how this was going just a few months ago, I'd have honestly said it was difficult," said Jill DiCuffa, a social studies teacher. "But since then, things have just gelled. I started thinking back on what we accomplished, and it has been so amazing."

The school, the second public all-girls school established by philanthropist Lee Posey, is modeled after a successful all-girls school in New York and is one of the first all-girls schools in the country to target low-performing students. Students apply from across the district, but admittance is determined by a lottery of eligible students. Eligibility is based on teacher recommendations, a student essay, TAKS scores, attendance and grades. To attract students of different academic achievement levels, applicants don't have to qualify in each category. The lottery was set up so that 75 percent of applicants come from low-income schools.

Since they were approved by the U.S. Department of Education in 2006, single-sex schools have grown in popularity. The number of single-sex public schools in the United States has risen from 24 in 2003 to more than 60 this year, according to the Washington-based National Association for Single Sex Public Education. The concept is not without its critics.

The National Organization for Women and the American Civil Liberties Union both say that there are no conclusive studies showing that segregation by sex increases learning and that such models are based on stereotypes, not science. They add that some single-sex schools have gone back to being coed after failing to see improvement in test scores.

The Richards school, however, made some quantitative strides. This year, 224 of its 229 students passed all TAKS portions. Twenty-three girls who passed all portions had in the past always failed at least one portion of TAKS. To earn the state's highest rating, 90 percent of students in various categories must pass all portions of the TAKS.

Richards school Principal Jeanne Goka attributes her students' success to several factors. The curriculum is built on what she said are typically girls' strengths, including collaborative and reflective learning. The girls are often given a problem, put into groups and required to use data they collect themselves to solve it. In addition, blue and white uniforms are required to instill professionalism and avoid distractions over clothes. "I want every girl who leaves this school to do so with the ability to solve problems not just at work, but in life," Goka said.

The teachers, many of whom previously taught in coed settings in the district, say Richards school students seem less inhibited about speaking out and trying new things than girls at other schools. The final day at the South Austin school was filled with frenzied yearbooks signings, a whoop-filled awards assembly and talent show, and a rowdy dodge ball tournament: students versus teachers.

The students say that with boys out of the picture, there's not as much to worry about. "We would always be like, 'Oh my gosh. He's so handsome,'" said Tamsyn Stonebarger, a seventh-grader. "Now, I feel like I can focus on school and not worry about what everyone thinks."

That's not to say there haven't been challenges. One of the biggest difficulties, Goka said, is cramming everything into the school day. Students next year will only take physical education classes during one semester because trying to squeeze the health and leadership class in on the same day as P.E. didn't work well this year. Another issue is transportation. Of 20 students who left the school this year, several said it was because of the time it took to get there, particularly those commuting from Northeast Austin. Some students withdrew because of families matters. Four left because they didn't like the all-girls concept — one student during the first six weeks of school and three in the second. Nina Salazar, a school counselor, said that after the first few months, several students told her that they wanted to go back to their old schools. "I realized basically these girls were homesick," Salazar said. "They all left their friends at their old schools and came here knowing few, if anyone. ... After winter break, and especially after spring break, it was like they really felt they were coming back to their home."

The campus is now readying for its next challenge: attracting high school students. The school, which only served sixth- and seventh-graders this year, will enroll eighth-graders in the fall and high school freshmen in 2009-10, adding a grade a year until Grade 12. Goka said to make the school an attractive place for high-schoolers, the campus will hold at least one coed dance and that there's talk of starting a filmmaking program.

"I've been really thinking about traditions and what we can do to establish ones that are not only fun and unique, but ones that truly have meaning, which takes planning. But I think it's especially important for a high school," Goka said.

The school's nonprofit advisory board, which raises money for the school, is trying to help as well. Ellen Richards, the board's president and daughter of former Gov. Ann Richards, said that by the time the oldest girls are freshmen, the board will pay for a permanent college adviser, whose job will be to take students on campus visits and ensure that they apply to college.

Ellen Richards said that it's something her mother, who died in 2006, would have wanted as part of a school dedicated to the advancement of young women. "I think my mom would love this," she said. "I look at these girls — how they present themselves and when they see you how they greet you in an appropriate way — I think she would be amazed and say that in one year, what they've accomplished has been pretty remarkable."

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