

Austin district should build on Graham Elementary's success

Editorial Board

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We recognized Graham Elementary School in Northeast Austin as one of the best public schools in Central Texas when it earned "exemplary" status on the state's 2011 report card. Now, let's celebrate the school as one of the best in the state and nation: Graham Elementary has been named a National Blue Ribbon School by the U.S. Department of Education.

That is a notable achievement that puts Graham in an elite group: Just 18 schools in Texas and 269 schools across the nation were named National Blue Ribbon Schools for 2012 based on their overall academic excellence or for making progress in improving student academic achievement levels. In November, the Education Department will honor Graham and 218 other public schools and 50 private schools at a ceremony in Washington.

But we're getting the celebration started now. Graham certainly has earned it.

As successful schools go, Graham defies many stereotypes. It's not rich, it's located on the wrong side of town (east of Interstate 35) and has a student enrollment that is 94 percent Hispanic and African American and 95 percent economically disadvantaged. Against such odds, Graham is soaring.

Too many East Austin schools are stuck in a cycle of failure or mediocrity, but Graham has quickly and quietly moved up a ladder of success, movement that started in earnest in 2007, with the arrival of a new principal, Blaine Helwig, who saw Graham's potential and picked up the pace.

Helwig told us that Graham was full of "latent talent," students who were smart but weren't performing well because they were behind academically. He believed the school would succeed if teachers and administrators found a way to quickly and effectively bring kids up to their grade levels and intervene quickly when they fell behind. The school, he said, then was rated "academically acceptable" but was on the verge of being downgraded to "academically unacceptable," the equivalent of a failing grade.

Helwig said he made three key changes that yielded big results. Working with teachers, he created a culture of hard work at the school "for students and faculty." He put in place what he called stopgap academic programs to rapidly accelerate kids who were behind or fell behind. And he tightened discipline.

"Discipline is paramount," Helwig said. "The kids, teachers and community must know that the school is a learning center." We find it interesting that Helwig has focused almost entirely on what is happening at school instead of children's home environments.

"A lot of school principals will concentrate on the home. I do not because I can't control that," he said. "I focus on the kiddo."

Many parents, seeing a transformation in their child's performance, get busy in ways that promote academic success, he said. At Graham, those rising expectations are lifting a lot of boats.

Helwig's approach removes the excuses that too often are used to write off students like those at Graham. That way of thinking says those students have too many barriers — be they race, income, bad home environments or homes in which little or no English is spoken — to be successful in the classroom. Such factors have become acceptable in explaining away poor performance. President George W. Bush, as Texas governor, correctly exposed that way of thinking as the "soft bigotry of low expectations."

Helwig's formula for success is not fancy, but it's obviously effective. The school has been ranked "exemplary" by the state in 2011, 2010 and 2009. That is akin to earning an A. It kept that ranking this year, which is a transitional year for Texas public schools that are under a new statewide testing system, called STAAR for State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness. Because of that, schools retained their state ratings from 2011.

Last year, we asked Austin School Superintendent Meria Carstarphen and elected trustees why they opted to spend big bucks to hire IDEA Public Schools, a public charter school about 300 miles away in far South Texas, to educate East Austin students in the Allen Elementary School attendance zone instead of using the Graham model. After all, Graham, in our own backyard, has a proven track record educating Austin kids. And Graham students were outperforming IDEA's kids academically. We asked this week whether the district was building on its own success by taking the Graham model to other struggling schools with similar student demographics. Oddly, it is not doing that. Now we ask, why not?

Helwig is doing his part by sharing the Graham model with other principals. That's laudable. But just think about how many more students could be successful, how many more Austin schools could soar if the district built on Graham's success.