



U.S. Department of Education

TEACHING MATTERS - November 29, 2012

U.S. Department of Education sent this bulletin at 11/29/2012 08:28 AM EST



November 29, 2012 | [Sign up](#) to receive Teaching Matters



Principal Blaine Helwig's school was recognized as a Blue Ribbon Award Winner recently in Washington, and Helwig was awarded the Terrel H. Bell Award for outstanding leadership.

**Graham Elementary School
(Austin, Texas)**

Beating the Odds (and the Naysayers)

Teachers at ED were impressed with all of the Terrel H. Bell principals that we met during the Blue Ribbon Schools National Celebration, but the principal of Graham Elementary School, Blaine Helwig, stood out because he has done what many thought was impossible: using home-grown strategies that others thought wouldn't work.

A self-proclaimed "upstart," Helwig said that his experience as a systems designer helped him plan systems that work for students in his school. "Yes, I am a rebel," he told us, "There can be no doubt of that. I will not follow a curriculum that is designed for children to fail or produce the level of academic results we are seeing continually in these urban schools."

Helwig's school is about 95 percent low-income. As reported in the *Austin Statesman*, the school has struggled for years because "it's not rich (and) it's located on the wrong side of town." Yet, against the odds, Graham excels. Since taking the helm in 2007, the school's academic achievement has grown so much that every student at Graham who took the state math exam passed it.

Helwig attributes his school's success to focusing on the variables he can control. While he can't change students' home environments or fix their poverty, he said that he can ensure they get what they need in his school.

Read two stories from the *Statesman* that reveal insights into Helwig's leadership style and strategies:

[Austin District Should Build on Graham Elementary's Success](#) and [A Model of Academic Success at Graham Elementary](#).

