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LOCAL

Northeast Austin's Graham Elementary School quietly excels

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Tucked in the far northeast corner of the Austin school district, Graham Elementary School is among the best public schools in Austin.

It hasn't had the reputation of some of its West Austin peers, but the school has quietly gone from being an average performer to one that has earned an exemplary academic rating, the highest given in Texas, for the past three years.

This year, it couldn't help but stand out as the only campus in the district east of Interstate 35 to earn that honor. A closer look reveals that all students who took the math portion of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills passed, even as many Texas schools saw passing rates fall .

While some campuses in Central Texas are touting new project-based teaching methods that have fewer lectures and more student collaborative efforts, Graham's faculty members say their secret to success is to do things old school.

Goals are straightforward. Instruction is supplemented by frequent testing and close tracking of student progress. Achievement is rewarded. And discipline — whether it's for the use of time or student behavior — reigns.

Teacher Angie Roberts has taught for more than 30 years at Graham, where 95 percent of students are from low-income families. She calls it a "back-to-basics" approach.

"People need to understand just because you're poor doesn't mean you're not as smart as someone else. They're just not exposed to things. They need to have a foundation," she said recently at a ceremony that honored her legacy.

The transformation began when Principal Blaine Helwig, a former structural engineer, arrived in 2008 and started designing systems to ensure that students are taught basic concepts in math, reading, writing and science and that he can intervene early if necessary.

Graham students are tested daily. Helwig can pull up their results on his computer at any time and see who is struggling. If students aren't showing a grasp of concepts, they get extra help.

"You have to be results-driven," said Helwig, 49 . "I don't go for the latest fad on anything."

At Graham, time management and efficient transitions from class to class and subject to subject are key. Students are expected to read while waiting for class to start. Teachers quiz students during time spent lining up and are expected to be organized and ready to switch subjects in a few minutes.

The loss of just 15 minutes a day adds up to nine days during the course of a school year, Helwig said. Being on task also helps teachers mitigate discipline problems.

Gloria Reyes, an instructional specialist in charge of Graham's reading program, said that when Helwig started at the school, the first thing he did was focus on discipline.

"He is very visible. He knows every child by name. If a child needs more encouragement, he is very good about stopping by and watching and coming in and saying, 'I hope you're having a great day today.' They all want to please him so much. There is just something about his personality," Reyes said.

Over the years, the school's culture has developed such that now students put pressure on one another to behave, she said.

Contrary to what some might think, math and science are the easiest subjects in which struggling students can improve, said Helwig, who started in education first as a tutor in East Austin and then as a teacher. But to improve a school where 25 percent of the children move in and out during any given school year is tough, he said. Teachers need to start with small concepts and then build on them, all the while reinforcing ideas through repetition.

In math, he said, the focus is on having students master nine skills, including skip counting, place values, simple addition and subtraction, and fractions. Students take five-minute tests each day on their mastery of those concepts.

When asked whether Graham faculty members teach to simply ensure that students pass state achievement tests, Helwig answered: "We teach fundamentals. Math fundamentals

have not changed in 2,000 years."

To teach reading, Reyes said, the system is to focus on building vocabulary, starting with 100 words and getting up to 800 words by third grade. Students are timed, have to know the words by sight and cannot simply sound them out. Once they reach their vocabulary goals, they are celebrated on Graham's campus television program.

After students complete reading assignments, teachers ask questions that are designed to resemble comprehension questions on the state reading exam.

Students are encouraged to read books and are rewarded with T-shirts, posters and parties for reading a certain number.

"Reading becomes a habit, something they are used to. And they love it," Reyes said. "They ask us, 'When do we get to start another book?'"

Children learning English make up more than half the student population at Graham, and there are small-group sessions to help them improve their fluency.

Just as in math, student progress in reading is monitored daily.

"We chart it all out, so we know exactly where they are and exactly what they still need," Reyes said.

Graham's systems are designed to be simple — because just like in engineering, anything that's too complicated won't result in broad success, Helwig said — but flexible. Once students get past the basics, teachers have free rein to structure their lessons any way they want, and many get creative, teachers said.

When students are promoted, they are learning on grade level, if not higher, Helwig said, and many are accepted to middle school magnet programs.

Jeanne Goka, principal of the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders, said Graham's students are strong applicants. Goka said it also is remarkable how many of them have stayed strong students.

"They come prepared and having done meaningful work," she said.

To Helwig, the reason for their success is clear.

"Once the foundation is done, they are mental giants," he said.