

# Ninth-grade campus making the grade

Lewisville: School boasts new facility, improved test scores

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By JAY PARSONS / The Dallas Morning News



**Ninth-grade students head for homeroom Thursday, the first day of classes at Killough Lewisville High School North, a new \$26 million, freshmen-only campus.**

RICKY MOON/Special Contributor

LEWISVILLE -- In 1996, school district officials told parents that Lewisville High was critically overcrowded. They had three options:

- 1) Make school year-round.
- 2) Split the high school into day and night classes.
- 3) Temporarily send ninth-graders to an abandoned middle school dubbed the "Dungeon" -- marked by few windows and little space.

Parents grudgingly went along with Option 3.

Nine years later, Lewisville district officials say they stumbled onto a great concept: Keep ninth-graders away from the big kids.

Test scores climbed, disciplinary referrals slid. Attendance rates jumped, pregnancies plummeted -- from 40 in 1996 to zero the next year, district officials said.

"At first, I thought it was stupid," said Susan Jones, president of the Lewisville High PTA and parent of two girls who went through the ninth-grade campus. "But now I'm all in favor of it."

Instead of moving the ninth-graders back to the expanded Lewisville High as planned, on Thursday the district opened a \$26 million freshmen-only campus, Killough Lewisville High School North.

There are at least seven freshmen campuses in the Dallas-Fort Worth area. Lewisville North is the only one ranked above "acceptable" by the Texas Education Association.

The school's "recognized" rating is more significant considering that half its students are minorities and almost one-third are low-income. And yet its rating topped two predominantly white high schools in the district.

In the U.S., minorities and low-income students generally score lower than their white counterparts on standardized tests.

Educators cite factors such as parental education level, income and primary language for the gap.

Another factor magnifying the school's rating: Only one of Lewisville North's four feeder middle schools was recognized. Two were acceptable and one was unacceptable. Lewisville High, its parent school, was rated acceptable.

Parents and teachers now say the buffer year better prepares kids for high school temptations: drugs, alcohol and sex. And the students aren't arguing.

"It's an easier transition into high school," said Tory Lane, who attended Lewisville North last year. "It's more work [than middle school] but you're not in the high school environment."



RICKY MOON/Special Contributor

**Laura Rubey and Andrew Lord look up their homerooms at Killough Lewisville High School North. Some say the freshmen-only campus makes the transition to high school easier.**

New ninth-graders poured into the halls of Lewisville North on the first day of school Thursday. Several said they preferred to rub elbows with upperclassmen, but the new building was a good trade-off.

"It feels like a high school because it's big but a middle school because it's all ninth-graders," said Emily Abney of Lewisville. "I'd rather go to the high school because we know some of the 10th-graders."

Students do spend some time at the Big House, as Lewisville High is called at the freshmen campus. Shuttles transport students 1.5 miles back and forth for advanced and extracurricular classes and sports. The schools share a PTA and a mascot, the Fighting Farmer.

## Limited studies

There are no statewide studies on freshmen campuses, education researchers said. Across Texas, isolating freshmen remains uncommon and grows slowly.

"There are some very specific needs of ninth-graders," said Jim Gibson, superintendent of the Cedar Hill school district, which opened a new freshmen center Thursday. "Students begin to experience a lack of academic success most profoundly at the ninth-grade level."

The state didn't test ninth-graders until 2003, making it difficult to compare students with those in 1996, the last year freshmen attended Lewisville High.

But even since 2003 -- and despite rising state standards -- Lewisville North's TAKS scores have improved in every category and ethnic group.

Teachers credit a simple concept that some dismiss as a talking point -- teamwork.

But at Lewisville North, that idea is tied to an intricate plan initiated three years ago. All 65 teachers -- even in electives such as art, drama, woodshop and P.E. -- incorporate the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

For example, the woodshop teacher assigns TAKS-style essays related to his course. He grades them on standards the state uses.

The result: The passing rate among low-income students grew from 83 percent in 2003 to 90 percent in 2005 on the TAKS reading test.

Rhonda Arnold, the school's testing coordinator, found that many students missed math questions because they didn't understand the wording. So she enlisted English teachers to instruct students how to read math questions and comprehend terms.

It worked. From 2003 to 2005, the school scored its biggest improvements in math, up from 85 percent to 90 percent passing. Hispanic scores jumped from 69 percent to 85 percent passing.

In the spring semester, the school devotes 22 minutes every day to *TAKS TV*, broadcast to every classroom. Teachers and students use music and drama to teach TAKS skills.

One show was modeled after the popular drama *Law & Order*. The episode depicted a courtroom with a lawyer who argued only an opinion without evidence. He lost the case.

"We made the analogy that it's exactly what they're writing," Mrs. Arnold said. "You have to back up your opinions."

The occasional critic says they're teaching to the test. Teachers have no problem with that.

"If someone says I'm teaching to the test, I'm glad," said Kathryn Phillips, a third-year English teacher. "It's stuff they need to know. If as a teacher you say it cramps your style, you're not doing it well."

### Keeping up the pace

Officials expect the district to grow by another 20,000 students, up to 65,000, in the next 10 to 15 years.

Along the way, trustees will choose between more ninth-grade campuses and four-year high schools and magnet schools.

"That model has worked there, and I think it can work at the other schools in our district," said Fred Placke, Lewisville's school board president.

Lewisville North Principal Andy Plunkett knows staying successful won't come easy. The area continues to attract more native Spanish speakers and low-income students who traditionally struggle on TAKS.

"Knowing that population is changing, we just have to keep doing what we're doing," Mr. Plunkett said.

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