

# Round Rock schools tops in Central Texas, study shows

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April 23, 2011

The Round Rock school district again has the top schools in Central Texas in every level: Westwood High School, Canyon Vista Middle School and Laurel Mountain Elementary, according to the newest annual list by Houston-based nonprofit Children at Risk, which ranks schools on a variety of factors.

Few urban schools topped the list, according to study results to be released Monday. Indeed, Austin's Lanier, Travis and Reagan high schools — where 79 to 88 percent of students are from low-income families — ranked among the lowest, the results show.

This is the third year the organization, which researches and advocates children's issues in Texas, has ranked Austin-area schools.

Thousands of schools statewide are ranked based on standardized test and college entrance exam performance, attendance rates and graduation rates, among other factors.

In the Austin area, 50 high schools, 87 middle schools and 228 elementary schools in Bastrop, Blanco, Burnet, Caldwell, Hays, Travis and Williamson counties were included.

Toni Garcia, Round Rock's deputy superintendent for instruction and school administration, said the common threads among the district's top schools are active parental involvement, low teacher turnover and continuous professional development for staff. Strong principal leadership also makes a difference, Garcia said.

Students excel, she said, "due to the high expectations that people have of each other."

Dozens of Austin schools made the top quarter of the state rankings. Bowie High School is the only high school in Central Texas to make the list of top 10 top high schools and top 10 most improved high schools.

Though the campus has made the top 10 list before, the percentage of students scoring within the "commended" range on the Texas Assessment and Knowledge of Skills, passing Advanced Placement and passing International Baccalaureate tests improved, as did attendance and graduate rates and college entrance exam scores.

Principal Steve Kane said Bowie's success is due to a caring, trained staff, involved parents, and students who show up ready to learn.

"We live off of 'Success is the only option here,' " Kane said. "We try to preach that whenever we can. We all have struggling kids, (but) we don't give them the option not to be successful. We try to put in some kind of support system to help them."

However, some Austin district high and middle schools, also ranked among the lowest.

Children at Risk researchers gave extra weight to schools with high percentages of low-income students to acknowledge the challenges associated with educating that group.

Still, much like in previous years, schools with smaller percentages of low-income students fared better in the study. For example, low-income students made up 6 to 11 percent of the enrollment at the top-ranked Westwood, Canyon Vista and Laurel Mountain campuses. Low-income students make up nearly 13 percent of Bowie's enrollment.

Top 10-ranked, majority-low-income schools that bucked that trend are Harmony Science Academy and NYOS Charter School, two high schools new to the list, and KIPP Austin and the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders. Harmony, NYOS and KIPP — where low-income enrollment ranges from 34 to 93 percent — are charter schools. At Richards, an all-girls magnet campus in the Austin school district, the low-income enrollment is 62 percent.

With school districts across the state cutting their budgets, slashing teacher jobs, increasing student-to-teacher ratios and cutting programs, students who come from low-income families will continue to fall behind, warned Bob Sanborn, president and chief executive of Children at Risk.

"Those schools at the bottom, those dropout rates will go higher if we have significant budget cutting in Austin," Sanborn said.

Sanborn said despite having higher graduation rates than the Houston and Dallas districts, Austin's graduation rate of 62.5 percent "should be an alarm for the general community."

"Increasingly, these kids who are dropping out of high school are going to be a burden on society," Sanborn said. "We need to be sure that all of us are successful, not just a part of the population."

However, Jarrell High School, with nearly 50 percent of students who are low-income, made the top of the list of the most improved schools. It ranked 12th overall among Central Texas high schools.

Pflugerville High School, with about 35 percent of its students from low-income families, ranked eighth among most improved and 15th in Central Texas.

"They still have that economically disadvantaged population but still seem to be doing a good job," Sanborn said.

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## **How Central Texas schools ranked:**

### **High schools**

- 1 Westwood Round Rock 25
- 2 Westlake Eanes 26
- 3 Harmony Science Academy charter school 70
- 4 Bowie Austin 74
- 5 McNeil Round Rock 80
- 6 Dripping Springs Dripping Springs 101
- 7 Cedar Park Leander 119
- 8 Wimberley Wimberley 136
- 9 NYOS Charter School 143
- 10 Lake Travis Lake Travis 156

### **Middle schools**

- 1 Canyon Vista Round Rock 6
  - 2 Hill Country Eanes 20
  - 3 Cedar Valley Round Rock 31
  - 3 West Ridge Round Rock 4
  - 5 Garland Round Rock 45
  - 6 Canyon Ridge Leander 49
  - 7 Hudson Bend Lake Travis 52
  - 8 KIPP Austin College Prep charter school 56
  - 9 Lake Travis Lake Travis 64
  - 10 Ann Richards School Austin 68
- for Young Women Leaders

## **Elementary schools**

1 Laurel Mountain Elementary Round Rock 14

2 Canyon Creek Round Rock 16

3 Spicewood Round Rock 25

4 Lakeway Lake Travis 26

5 Barton Creek Eanes 37

6 Bush Leander 52

7 Highland Park Austin 61

8 Ford Georgetown 67

9 Sommer Round Rock 73

10 Barton Hills Austin 83

Most improved high schools

1 Jarrell (12\*) Jarrell 177

2 Luling (42\*) Luling 879

3 San Marcos (29\*) San Marcos 457

4 Taylor (33\*) Taylor 577

5 Marble Falls (24\*) Marble Falls 356

6 Burnet (27\*) Burnet 379

7 Del Valle (37\*) Del Valle 727

8 Pflugerville (15\*) Pflugerville 216

9 Lago Vista (14\*) Lago Vista 214

10 Bowie (4\*) Austin 74

\* Overall rank in Central Texas

**Courtesy of JB Goodwin**