

FROM THE PUBLISHER

Wick Allison

No Child Left Behind

A South Dallas elementary school shows that poor kids can compete with the best.



IN AN ISSUE THAT GIVES THE FACTS ON private schools (see p. 86), I want to share some news from the other side of the street. For once the news about Dallas public schools is good.

The good news comes from the unlikely of unlikely places, the Frazier Court projects in South Dallas.

Last year, Frazier Elementary came in at number 82 in *D Magazine's* ranking of the 250 best elementary schools in the Dallas region. When taking into account the quality of the competition—from places like Highland Park, Plano, and Southlake—Frazier's comparatively high standing raised a few eyebrows. A year later, the school is raising more than eyebrows; it is raising hopes that poor children can compete with the best students in Texas.

The facts speak for themselves. To put them in context, it's useful to compare Frazier to the best public elementary school in the state, Armstrong Elementary in Highland Park. In third-grade math, Armstrong's continuously enrolled kids scored 98.4 percent passing on TAAS and 93.4 percent proficient. Frazier's kids scored 100 percent passing and 87 percent proficient. Among the same group in reading, Armstrong scored 100 percent passing and 96.7 percent proficient. Frazier scored 95.6 percent passing and 82.6 percent proficient.

Armstrong's neighborhood is one of the most desirable places to live in the United States. Frazier's neighborhood is a disaster. Armstrong's percentage of low-income students is zero; Frazier's is 97.9 percent.

How is Frazier doing it? Behind the numbers lies a story.

In 1992, Texas Instruments approached SMU's Learning Therapy Program to salvage a two-year-old investment the company had made in a Head Start center in Frazier Courts. TI is a results-oriented

company, and the results of its involvement hadn't been encouraging.

SMU's people installed a phonics-based, pre-reading curriculum that has since been christened LEAP (Language Enrichment Activities Program). In the years since the program was put in place, kids who were routinely in the 30th percentile nationally on standardized tests jumped to the 70th percentile. Kids who attend the preschool now score an average of 15 points on TAAS above kids from the same neighborhood who don't.

Have we found the magic bullet? Nothing is that easy. The reason poor kids don't learn isn't only because—until now—nobody knew how to teach them. It's also because their parents (or parent, as is most often the case) drag them around every time they move, and poor people move a lot. At Frazier, almost half of the kids move in and out of the school during the year. But even if it's not a magic bullet, LEAP is a solution for the group of kids who stay put.

TI has already built another preschool to learn how to make LEAP work with Hispanic children in the Anson Jones area. And another LEAP preschool is being built to feed Roberts and Harris elementary schools, its \$1.3 million cost being underwritten by former TI executive Dave Martin and his wife Maria.

There are three lessons to be taken from Frazier's achievement. The first is a reminder of how much Dallas owes TI, its founders, its executives, and its employees. The second is that applying performance standards and holding people accountable works as well in education as anywhere else. The third is persistence counts.

Now we know what works. The challenge is to get it in place for the other 151 elementary schools in Dallas.