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Can DISD Deliver?

By Sara Kitto & Rob Shearer

The good news is that Dallas is reinventing itself. As the urban core undergoes a revitalization, the skyrocketing property values in surrounding neighborhoods like Oak Cliff would make investors from California to New York drool. So this means your house is worth more today than it was yesterday.



The bad news is that the public school system has not kept pace with the rising real estate market. Or so some neighbors would have you believe: DISD-bashing is as common in Dallas as a hot day in August. But how is this possible when Newsweek just declared Oak Cliff-based DISD Talented and Gifted Magnet the best high school in America?

Clearly, DISD suffers from an image problem, a problem not unlike the image problem that plagues Oak Cliff. Yes, there are real issues that the district needs to address. But there is also an incredible academic experience waiting for those who take the time to find it.



"It's just amazing what a program like this can do to help the kids learn a new language," says Pam Arnold (right) with husband, Chris, and their three children. Daughter Sanai (far left) attends Rosemont's Dual Language program.

It takes very little investigation to learn that Rosemont Elementary is a success story for DISD. Established in 1922, Rosemont has long been a safe-haven for the youngest of neighborhood students and the darling of North Oak Cliff families.

The new addition, this fall, of the dual language program in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten will only solidify Rosemont as a stellar option for elementary education in Oak Cliff. The school has grown to over 1000 students in recent years, necessitating the addition of larger facilities; the Rosemont Primary School campus was opened last year to accommodate pre-kindergarten through


Rosemont Primary School

second grade, while Rosemont Elementary houses third through sixth grades.

"It is a very exciting time at Rosemont," says Principal Anna Brining. "We've got so much to offer the community." She touts the new language program as providing a much-needed service to today's students and tomorrow's leaders. "The dual language program not only makes our school better," she explains, "but we're preparing our students for the reality of our changing demographics across the country."

And parents who were able to enroll their students in this new lottery-based program seem thrilled. Kessler Park parents Chris and Pam Arnold enrolled their daughter, Sanai, in the kindergarten dual language class because learning another language has always been a priority for them. "We've always wanted our kids to speak a couple of languages," explains Chris, "so that was something we looked for in schools. With the introduction of the dual language program at Rosemont, it sealed the deal."

Sanai previously attended popular Oak Cliff private school, The Kessler School, for pre-kindergarten, yet the Arnold's have been impressed with the early results from Rosemont. "She was learning some Spanish at The Kessler School during pre-k, but she's already learned more in one week than she learned in an entire year of pre-k," says Pam. "Not to take anything away from The Kessler School," she adds, emphasizing the positive experience her daughter had at the private school, "but it's just amazing what a program like this can do to help the kids learn a new language."



"Our five children have benefited so much from [DISD's Montessori School] Harry Stone," Josie Avina (left) states, shown here with her husband Luis and their children.

For the uninitiated, the dual language program is a full-time curriculum that has classes split between students who speak English as their native language, and students who speak Spanish as their native language. The students have two teachers: one teaches in English while the other teaches in Spanish.

Jerome Garza, DISD Trustee for North Oak Cliff, is optimistic that the dual language program will make the Rosemont choice for parents even easier. "The goal is also that by the fourth grade, we will introduce a third language into the program. Where else in the United States can you find that?" asks Garza. "Why do you send you kids to a private school? Because at a young age, they teach them a second language. With this program, how can you not give DISD a second look?"



And language acquisition is not the sole objective at Rosemont, Brining further explains. The program aims "not only for the kids to become bilingual – reading, writing and speaking fluently," she says, "but for them also to become bicultural." The dual-language training is designed to expand every year until it is available in all grades throughout Rosemont.

Yet Rosemont is not the exclusive DISD option for Oak Cliff parents. Harry S. Stone and George Dealey are

Montessori-oriented public schools that serve pre-kindergarten through eighth grade students. Winnetka Heights residents Luis and Josie Avina have sent each of their five children to Harry S. Stone and are pleased to have the

Montessori option within DISD. "Our five children have benefited so much from Harry Stone," explains Josie.

"The teachers there are great and have taught our kids so much about independent learning and self-motivation." Two of the Avina's older children have since graduated from Harry S. Stone, and both were well-prepared for the rigors of high school. And while Bush Administration Education Initiative "No Child Left Behind" has clearly altered parts of the Montessori experience, the Avina's and many other Oak Cliff parents continue to support the schools and the impact they are having on their children.

Surprised that a public school system would include Montessori? Wait until you hear about Irma Rangel Young Women's Leadership School. An all-girls school serving students from sixth through 10th grades, and slated to expand to 12th grade in the next two years, Irma Rangel is one of only a handful of single-sex public schools in the nation.



Sidney Lanier

Currently serving 213 girls, the mission of Irma Rangel, according to dallasisd.org, "is to nurture the intellectual curiosity and creativity of young women and to address their developmental needs through dynamic, participatory learning processes." The school also stresses rigorous academics, aiming to prepare its students both for college and graduate school.

William B. Travis Academy is another option for Oak Cliff families. A popular transition for students graduating from Rosemont Elementary, it is a Talented and Gifted school for students in fourth through eighth grades. "At Travis, academics are stressed, but with a creative approach," says Karla Rojas, a Kessler Park parent and Travis PTA Vice President. "One thing I like best about Travis is the attitude of the teachers and staff. Every morning the principal tells the kids that they are the best in the nation. She knows how to instill confidence," Rojas explains.

And the options don't stop there – DISD offers many interest-specific choices for students. For fourth and fifth grades, Sidney Lanier Elementary teaches classes for expressive and fine arts, and B.F. Darrell Elementary teaches a science, math and technology focus. When students graduate to middle and high school, DISD presents even more opportunities for specialized schools, including programs for government, law, law



B.F. Darrell School

enforcement, health professions, fine arts, environmental sciences, and business management. Each year the district hosts a Magnet School Fair where parents and students can get a more complete picture of all the educational opportunities available to them. The next fair will be January 6 at Skyline High School.

But back to that ranking of public high schools by Newsweek magazine. If you missed the news earlier this summer, not one but two DISD schools were ranked in the top 10 high schools in the nation. Both schools, the School for Talented and Gifted as well as the School for Science and Engineering, are located right here in Oak Cliff. The Yvonne A. Ewell Townview Center, located on Eighth Street, provides a hub of sorts for these two schools, as well as for four other DISD specialty senior high programs.

And no conversation about DISD is complete without including Booker T. Washington High School for the Performing and Visual Arts. Currently undergoing a \$35-\$38 million renovation, 60 percent of which was raised in the private sector, Booker T. boasts accomplished alumni like Norah Jones, Erykah Badu and Edie Brickell. Jerome Garza could not be more excited about this school and its renovation. "It is going to be a fabulous facility. Booker T. is one of the top five art schools in the nation," he explains. "And a sign of our success with schools like Booker



Yvonne A. Ewell Townview Center

T. and TAG is that parents in other school districts are noticing. We have students applying to these schools from Plano, Highland Park and other surrounding districts. These parents pay to have their kids attend schools in DISD!”

Despite these successes, it remains clear that DISD still has challenges to face. According to Garza, 79 percent of DISD students are on a free- or reduced-lunch program. This staggering statistic speaks to the financial plight of a significant part of our population, and an exodus away from DISD by a majority of the population with adequate financial means. It’s a problem we all must face. Sunset High School, while a striking architectural landmark, is not listed in Newsweek’s best high schools. But change happens slowly, and DISD seems to be taking the necessary steps to transform itself from just another negative urban statistic to an example of educational excellence in a major metropolitan area.

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