



LEWISVILLE ISD

## Night High School ensures all students receive their diplomas no matter their circumstances

by John Egan



Superintendent  
Jerry Roy

Iris Harper dropped out of Lewisville ISD's Hebron High School only three weeks before graduation in 2008. She was one English class away from earning a high school diploma. On the surface, her decision to quit school seemed wrong-headed. But at that point in her life, Harper wasn't in her right mind.

"I was on a lot of drugs, and I was not focused on life," she says. "I just wanted to work and make money so I could do my drugs."

Several months later, however, Harper hit bottom. She awoke one day to the realization that her drug-fueled existence had to stop. Filled with newfound determination, she kicked her addiction and began the process of getting her life back on track. Upon the suggestion of her sister, Harper contacted Lewisville ISD about its new Night High School program, which launched in January 2009. Harper enrolled and, in March 2009, became a graduate of Hebron High.

Now, with her sights set on becoming a professional chef, Harper is pursuing a degree in culinary arts from Collin County Community College. To support her dream, she works as an assistant manager at a retail store in nearby Grapevine.

"I feel great," says Harper, who celebrated her 20th birthday in October. "I'm excited that I've got my life back on track, for the most part. Sometimes school and work are really stressful, but you've just got to remember what your priorities are. If you want to succeed, you will do everything in your power to succeed."

Success stories like Harper's are what Lewisville ISD's Night High School Program is all about. The program targets three groups from ages 16 to 21: dropouts, at-risk students and students who

merely want to accelerate their learning. The Night High School's motto is "Bringing Hope to Students."

Night High School classes begin at 5 p.m. and 7 p.m., Monday through Thursday, and are 90 minutes each. Completion of one course — lasting four and a half weeks — earns a student half a credit. Four Night High School terms are offered each fall and spring, and there's also a summer schedule. The alternative school operates out of the district's Lewisville Learning Center. Courses offered include algebra, geometry, math, world geography, world history, U.S. history, government, economics, English, biology, chemistry, aquatic science and physics. Career-related subjects include animation, advertising design, automotive technology, cosmetology and health science technology.

Additionally, in conjunction with North Central Texas College, dual-credit courses are available in U.S. history, government, economics, algebra, statistics, psychology and sociology. The district added an SAT prep class this year.

"Ultimately, we just wanted to provide a different venue for kids to get a diploma," says Kevin Rogers, Lewisville ISD's assistant superintendent of secondary education.

If students don't fit the traditional education mold, "that doesn't give us an excuse to give up on them," adds Lewisville ISD Superintendent Jerry Roy.

A 2008 survey of more than 800 students at Lewisville ISD's five high schools revealed that nearly 16 percent *definitely* would enroll in Night High School or a flexible daytime education program, while nearly 30 percent indicated they *probably* would enroll in such programs.

"We're not going to be able to just operate traditional high schools and be successful," Roy says. "We're going to have to do some things differently."

Roy, along with a team of district officials, studied successful night school programs in neighboring districts prior to launching their own program. They looked at schools in both Garland and Carrollton-Farmers Branch ISDs. However, as Rogers notes, "you can't just copy something from somewhere else. You have to make it work for you."

To make it work for students in Lewisville ISD, administrators developed a curriculum that offers both core subjects and career-focused classes. Night High School students work closely with counselors and teachers to identify a rewarding career path while earning a high school diploma.

A 2006 study by the American Institute for Research found that essential elements of successful alternative education programs like Night High School include:

- flexibility in programming and hours
- low student-to-adult ratios
- student choice
- personalized environments
- extensive staff collaboration and training
- availability of transportation for students
- solid case management
- strong school-to-work components

Roy says his district's Night High School features a project-based curriculum with real-world applications geared toward 21st century skills.

"We've got to meet these kids where they are and not where we want them to be. They're not all going to come to day school; it hasn't worked for them," Rogers adds. "We've got to be a little creative and reinvent part of the wheel."

Throughout the spring of 2009, 122 Night High School students sought to "reinvent" themselves in one way or another. Among them, 46 completed their coursework and earned diplomas — 19 accelerated students, 17 at-risk students and 10 dropouts. (Rogers refers to the latter two groups as *at-promise students* and *drop-ins*.)

In all, the 122 spring semester students earned 183.5 credits, mostly in core subjects. Rogers is particularly proud that all nine Night High School students who had previously failed the TAKS test were able to pass it and receive their diplomas. One of those students had fallen short four times on the science component of TAKS.



Night High School student Brenda Ruiz works on a class project about the Cold War. Lewisville ISD created the alternative school to make education accessible to students whose circumstances prevent them from attending classes during regular school hours. Ruiz gave birth to her first child this past October — and earned her diploma that same month, thanks to Night High School.

"She didn't believe she could do it. But she was willing to give it one more shot, and she passed," Rogers says.

The overall success with TAKS passage in the spring of 2009 "gave us a good initial reinforcement that what we're doing makes sense and works," he adds.

Rogers and other Lewisville ISD administrators continually assess what works — and what doesn't — with the Night High School program. Roy says that as the program evolves, the district must be open to on-the-fly modifications to address issues and opportunities that crop up.

One overriding issue for the Night High School is funding. Currently, the program operates on about \$500,000 per fiscal year; the budget covers eight full-time and seven part-time employees. Night High School services including home visits and tutoring. The program's budget is comprised of a dropout recovery grant from the Texas Education Agency, as well as state high school allotment funds and local tax money. The bad news: the TEA grant expires in December, and Lewisville ISD faces an \$18 million budget deficit in the next fiscal year.

Dipping into reserve funds and asking Lewisville ISD taxpayers for relief may prevent the district from slicing into the "meat" of its budget to keep the program going, Roy says. For now, though, Roy is concerned that monetary woes could force the district to axe the Night High School.

The loss of such a program would hamper the progress of students like 17-year-old Brenda Ruiz. This past October, Ruiz gave birth to her first child, a girl named Makayla. That's also the month she earned her high school diploma, thanks to Night High School.

Early in her pregnancy during the spring of 2009, Ruiz, a junior, was ordered to go on bed rest, so

See LEWISVILLE page 59

she was unable to attend regular classes at The Colony High School. Once the bed-rest period ended, Ruiz enrolled in the Night High School Program to get back on track. Because of her accelerated education track, Ruiz actually graduated ahead of her classmates.

Without Night High School, "it would have been a lot harder" to earn a diploma, Ruiz says.

Ruiz is a statistical anomaly. Only about one-third of teen mothers in the United States obtain high school diplomas or GEDs, according to the Guttmacher Institute, a nonprofit that studies sexual and reproductive health issues. The institute also cites that teen mothers are now more likely than in the past to complete high school or obtain a GED, but they are still less likely than women who delay childbearing to go on to college.

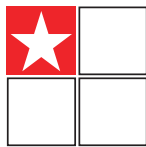
Rogers says it's much less costly to help students like Ruiz and Harper now than to suffer the more expensive consequences later. Lewisville ISD is fighting to keep its Night High School in operation. In 2006-2007 (the latest statistic available), the district's dropout rate for ninth- through 12th graders was only 1.1 percent.

"We'll continue to push the envelope and try to find other ways we can serve kids at night," Rogers says. "We're getting there, but we're certainly not there yet."

JOHN EGAN is the former editor of the *Austin Business Journal*.

## The Cost of Dropping Out

- \$ The average annual income for an American high school dropout in 2005 was \$17,299, compared with \$26,933 for a high school graduate, according to U.S. Census Bureau statistics. "Not only do high school dropouts earn less when they are employed, they are much more likely to be unemployed during economic downturns," according to the Alliance for Excellent Education.
- \$ More than half of U.S. dropouts ages 16 to 24 were jobless during an average month in 2008.
- \$ If the more than 120,000 Texas students who dropped out in 2007 had graduated, their additional lifetime income would have added up to more than \$32 billion, according to estimates from the Alliance for Excellent Education.
- \$ Cutting the dropout rate in half would yield \$45 billion annually in new federal tax revenue or cost savings, according to Columbia University's Center for Benefit-Cost Studies of Education at Teachers College.
- \$ Over the course of his or her life, each American dropout costs taxpayers more than \$292,000 in terms of lower amounts of taxes paid and higher spending for social costs, including incarceration, health care and welfare, according to a report by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston.



# O'Connell Robertson



**50+ YEARS  
EXPERIENCE IN  
EDUCATIONAL  
DESIGN**



[www.oconnellrobertson.com](http://www.oconnellrobertson.com)  
Austin San Antonio

*Practical Innovation*  
architecture engineering interiors