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Killeen schools chart new course

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Smaller class sizes plus for charter school students, teachers

By Chris McGuinness

Killeen Daily Herald

When high school junior Billy Anspach pops into Rose Thompson's office after his class, she immediately recognizes him. She knows his name, his grades and even asks him about his family.

"She knows me really well," said the 16-year-old about the director of the Richard Milburn Academy. "She knows all her students really well."

Milburn, one of two charter high schools in Killeen, offers students alternative options to obtaining an education, said Thompson, who has been the school's director for 11 years. The local campus is one of eight Milburn schools in Texas.

"It's about thinking outside of the box," said Thompson. "It's about trying to see what is the best fit for the student."

In 1995, the Texas Legislature passed a law that allows nonprofit groups of parents, educators and other citizens to form charter schools. It capped the number of charter schools at 215. As of December 2011, the state Board of Education had granted 208 of those charters.

"An open-enrollment charter school is the same as a public school in that they are funded by the state, they can't charge tuition, and they must accept all students who want to enroll," said DeEtta Culbertson, a spokeswoman for the Texas Education Agency, which has oversight of public education in the state. "The difference is they can accept students from anywhere, and they are able to be more flexible about how they deliver curriculum."

That "flexibility" can take various forms. Transformative Charter Academy in Killeen, another charter high school, offers one-on-one academic coaching in addition to classes and requires students to participate in community-service projects.

"Our curriculum is largely self-paced," said Claudette Morgan-Scott, chief executive officer at Transformative Charter. "We are looking to help students catch up if they are behind on credits or want to graduate early."

At Milburn, Thompson said the school's class schedule runs in two blocks: from 8 a.m. to noon and from 1 to 5 p.m.

"It allows the students who work a more flexible schedule," she said. "That way, they are not in class stressing out about their job and they can focus on their work."

While the state requires charters to accept all students, both high schools in Killeen focus on structuring their programs to help students at-risk of dropping out graduate instead.

For the 2010-11 school years, TEA reports identified 81.6 percent of Milburn's student population as "at-risk" as well as 100 percent of the Transformative Charter's students.

"These aren't bad kids," said Thompson. "They have many struggles and challenges in their lives, and we are here to help them overcome those and get an education and graduate."

Smaller class sizes



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Although Killeen's two charter schools have an unique approach to education, both have a much smaller student population, allowing them to offer smaller class sizes.

Transformative Charter had 75 students for the 2010-11 school year, and state agency reports show that the average class-size ranged between eight and 16.8 students, depending on the subject.

Milburn had 152 students for the same year, and its average class-size ranged between 2.5 and 9.3 students, according to the state reports.

Both schools fell under the average class-size for Killeen High School, which ranged from 19.4 to 23.5 students per-class for the 2010-11 school year.

Anspach said the smaller class sizes were his favorite aspect of Milburn and felt his academics had improved because of them.

"There are a lot less students. It makes it easier to ask a question, and it's just a less stressful environment," said Anspach. "It's really great because you feel like you get more one-on-one time with the teachers, and they have time to answer your questions and make sure you understand things."

The smaller class sizes are also a plus for charter school teachers, such as Naim Abdullah, a government and economics teacher at Milburn.

"There's no question that it's much better for the kids," said Abdullah, a former high school teacher in the Killeen school district. "Every student learns differently, and it's a little harder to cater to each student in very large groups."

Charter schools' smaller class sizes and more personalized education may be drawing more parents to enroll their children, said Thompson, adding that she believed close to 80 percent of parents stated they were looking for a school with smaller classes.

Milburn's Killeen campus has seen a jump in enrollment, growing from 152 students last year to a current enrollment of 180, so far this school year. Transformative Charter, which is not part of a larger group of campuses, has maintained at 75 student enrollment for the last two years.

"I think the word is getting out and people are more informed about what a charter school is," said Thompson. "That's why I think we are seeing growth."

Culbertson said she wasn't surprised by the student population increases. "We have seen a growth, not just in new charter schools, but in the desire for existing charter schools to expand," she said.

In 2011, the state board awarded eight charters, one more than the previous year. Culbertson said applications for new charter schools are not due until early February, but she could not predict how many would be awarded for 2012.

"In the end, we are really here to offer a choice to parents and students," said Thompson. "No matter what kind of school you have, the goal should always be the same: To give our children the best education possible and prepare them for the future."

Contact Chris McGuinness at chrism@kdhnews.com or (254) 501-7568.

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