

⦿ Dallas' Uplift charter prepares low-income grads for college success

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Dance music pounded into the basketball arena at [Southern Methodist University](#). The Dallas Mavericks' mascots bopped around the floor, pumping up the young audience. Those in the stands were already giddy when the music finally softened and the announcer introduced the heroes of the moment: the graduating seniors of the five high schools in the Uplift Education charter district.

The crowd went wild.

High school graduation is a big deal for anyone, but for these kids, 90 percent of whom are minorities and 60 percent of whom qualify as low-income, Tuesday was even bigger.

It was college signing day, and every Uplift senior is headed to college in the fall.

Various dignitaries spoke from the stage set up at one end of the arena. Then, with their younger classmates cheering, the seniors took turns at the microphone:

"My name is Rohit Bachal, and in 2015, I will graduate from the [University of Texas!](#)" announced a gangly boy.

"My name is Sherin John, and in 2015, I will graduate from Southern Methodist University!" called out a girl with long, dark curls.

"My name is Xochil Guerrero, and in 2015, I will graduate from [Boston College!](#)" said a short girl with a sense of quiet conviction.

Uplift Education is an open-enrollment charter district with seven campuses in the Dallas area. The campuses have been growing since they opened. This is the first year the district's five high schools — Hampton Prep, Williams Prep, North Hills Prep, Summit International Prep and Peak Prep — are all launching a senior class.

Guerrero, 18, said being a student at Peak Prep in Old [East Dallas](#) was hard work, but that she didn't face the challenge alone. "I had a lot of support from my teachers. They came in on Saturdays and everything. I think I'm going to [Boston College](#) because they helped me."

She will be the first in her family to attend college. Her mother finished high school in [El Salvador](#), but Lilian Flores said she wanted her daughter to "have a better lifestyle than we do now."

As supportive as Flores is, though, she won't be able to visit Boston often, and she won't have much advice on how to navigate the vagaries of dorm life or the red tape of financial aid departments.

It's a common problem for first-generation college students. Without the experience of parents who attended college, only 41 percent of low-income students manage to graduate in four years, according to the U.S. [Department](#) of Education.

At Peak Prep, there's a plan for this. Her name is Aleta Estrada. Her full-time job is to help seniors get into college and, once they're there, to help them stay.

"From the first day on campus, they're on their own," Estrada said. "Just knowing they have someone they can call makes the transition easier."

Estrada said she calls students regularly, fields questions about all sorts of minor problems and even visits campuses. Basically, she acts like a parent.

For students like Guerrero, Estrada could make the difference. Guerrero is confident and poised, but she said it helps to know that the support she's had from Peak Prep won't go away next year.

"It's all up to the person. They decide where or not to continue on to college," Guerrero said. "If they have the support, they can make it."