

HISD boosts incentives for students to stay put

Push targets top students, immigrants

By JENNIFER RADCLIFFE
HOUSTON CHRONICLE

Oct. 15, 2010, 9:23PM

Middle and high school classes will get tougher as part of an effort Houston ISD officials announced Friday to help persuade thousands of families to keep their children in the state's largest district.

The latest concept in HISD's college-readiness push, a partnership with the College Board, should help better prepare all students, including top-performers and recent immigrants, for higher education, officials said.

Among the prime targets: the 3,500 to 5,500 fifth-graders who desert HISD in favor of attending sixth-grade at a private or charter middle schools each year. Parents who pull their children out of HISD after elementary school often cite safety and academic concerns.

"That's what I've heard over and over and over," Superintendent Terry Grier said. "We are missing the mark with kids at the top. We don't need a glass ceiling for those kids."

Even some of the district's highly regarded secondary schools are failing to prepare students, he said.

About 60 percent of HISD's class of 2008 went on to post-secondary studies within a year after graduation, according to the National Student Clearinghouse. But many of them are arriving on campus ill-prepared. Statewide statistics repeatedly show that almost half of Texas high school graduates who enrolled directly in Texas colleges needed remedial classes to teach them what they should have already learned.

HISD's new program would offer a prestigious pre-Advanced Placement designations to middle schools that meet a number of standards, including offering all students a pre-AP curriculum in the core subjects. Middle schools would be required to offer tougher math classes for advanced students.

It would require at least 80 percent of native Spanish speakers to take the AP Spanish language test, which could help immigrants realize that college is a possibility.

"This is an opportunity to show we're not just focused on one segment of our kids," said Greg Meyers, school board president.

High schools could earn a special designation if they offer at least 15 AP courses and all 10th-, 11th- and 12th-graders take one or more AP courses. At least 40 percent of the exams taken must score a 3 or higher, usually the cut-off mark for a student to receive college credit. And all freshmen will tour at least one college campus to earn the designation.

"This is a very strong strategy," Grier said. "It's unlike anything others are doing."

SAT on campus

HISD will also allow high schoolers to take the SAT on campus during the regular school day starting next spring, rather than traveling elsewhere on a Saturday to take the test.

Only two other districts in the nation offer the on-campus testing option, officials said. HISD's plan is among the most ambitious in the country and should have a significant impact on college-readiness, said Gaston Caperton, president of the College Board, which administers the SAT, ACT and Advanced Placement exams.

"We've got to be sure we give every kid a chance to reach their potential," he said. "We've got to have high expectations and engage every kid."

HISD officials emphasized that this won't replace any of the initiatives that are succeeding in middle and high schools, including the International Baccalaureate and dual credit programs.

Many of the program's costs will be offset by state funding.

Take classes, win prizes

The district plans to seek corporate sponsors to host an annual ceremony to honor students who take five or more advanced classes. Items such as cars, computers and scholarships could be raffled off, Grier said. This will give seniors an extra nudge to take a heavier course load.

"Celebrating works," Grier said. "Making people feel special works."

jennifer.radcliffe@chron.com