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Charter school with 100 percent college acceptance rate eyes Fort Worth

By: Eva-Marie Ayala, Star-Telegram (Texas)



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FORT WORTH -- A charter school system that boasts that 100 percent of its high school graduates are accepted into college announced Wednesday that it plans to open four schools in Fort Worth.

Uplift Education officials did not disclose the schools' locations but said efforts have been focused on southeast Fort Worth.

The first three schools are expected to open next year -- two elementary schools and a middle school

temporarily housed at one of the elementary sites. In 2014, a secondary campus housing the middle and high schools would open.

"We really take a regional approach," Uplift founder Rosemary Perlmeter said Wednesday at the Omni Fort Worth Hotel. "We have so many students interested in our schools with a long waiting list. We knew there was a broader need to expand. I never imagined that we would go from one school to more than 20 educational programs and keep growing from there."

Uplift is a Dallas-based nonprofit that receives state money to run the public charter schools. It has also received grants from philanthropic groups including the Amon G. Carter Foundation, Michael and Susan Dell Foundation, Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Rainwater Charitable Foundation and Sid W. Richardson Foundation.

It operates 19 schools at nine locations across North Texas, including Summit International Preparatory in Arlington, that focus on rigorous academics and college readiness.

Summit senior Emily Carlson said she wasn't initially interested in going to school there. As a freshman, she was happy at her traditional public high school, though she felt that she wasn't being challenged except for a few Advanced Placement classes.

But at her parents' urging, she decided to visit Summit.

"I absolutely fell in love with the school that day," Carlson said of the high school, which is rated exemplary by the state. "Everyone there cares about doing well. At a regular public school, you have some students who are just there because they have to be. Their parents made them. But at Summit, everyone wants to be there. The students want to excel."

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Carlson said Summit's workload is heavier, with more homework and projects than she was used to. But she said she also gets more one-on-one support in the smaller classes.

Uplift also has campuses in Irving and Dallas and plans to add more in those cities.

In The Washington Post's [rankings of the nation's top high schools this year](#), North Hills Preparatory in Irving was 11th and Peak Preparatory in Dallas was 12th.

About 90 percent of Uplift students are minorities, and nearly 60 percent come from low-income families, school officials said. Uplift has about 6,000 students and plans to have 13,000 by 2015.

Southeast-side focus

Uplift's plans to open charter schools in Fort Worth are part of a fast-changing effort to revitalize academics and spur development in the southeast part of the city.

"We are focusing on southeast Fort Worth because it has been economically and educationally underserved," said George P. Bush, a local attorney who is chairman of the Fort Worth Uplift board.

Bush, a former high school teacher and the son of former Florida Gov. Jeb Bush, has been instrumental in bringing the charter schools to the city.

The Fort Worth school district is working to improve education in the area east of Interstate 35W and south of Interstate 30, where many of its lowest-performing schools are.

This year, the district launched new career and college-prep programs at each of its 13 high schools. Trustees recently approved converting the Dunbar 6th Grade Center on the east side to an all-boys academy focused on college readiness.

Various programs, including those aimed at attracting the best teachers to the most-struggling schools, have been implemented in many east-side campuses.

Additionally, former Dallas Cowboys star Deion Sanders is part of an unrelated charter school group called Uplift Fort Worth, which plans to open a campus off Lancaster Avenue near Oakland Boulevard next year.

Working together

Andre McEwing, executive director of Southeast Fort Worth Inc., said he's excited about Uplift Education's plans and the changes on his side of town. He said Uplift's efforts should not be seen as competing against local schools but as strengthening opportunities for everyone.

"We need to have quality, affordable and progressive education choices in the city of Fort Worth and in particular in southeast Fort Worth," he said. "Working in concert with what the Fort Worth school district is already doing will help spur much-needed economic development and growth in that area."

Mayor Betsy Price said quality education citywide is the key to moving Fort Worth forward. The City Council and school district trustees recently met to discuss working together to address needs, including a possible natatorium partnership in southeast Fort Worth.

Price recently issued a call for more businesses and volunteers to get involved in education.

"Fort Worth is challenging its public schools to step it up, and Uplift will be a part of that," she said.

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