

Pin Oak Middle School

Bellaire, Texas



Pin Oak Middle School, in the town of Bellaire, Texas west of downtown Houston, is part of the Houston Independent School District. Only seven years old, it impresses visitors with the brightness and cheer of its interior space.

Sophisticated examples of student work from many disciplines are displayed along the walls of spotless corridors. One corridor leads directly to the cafeteria, an area which in most schools is at best uninspired and mundane. Pin Oak's is a cheery oasis thanks to the sunlight that pours in through tall, three-story windows. There is even an outdoor seating area for use in the warmer months as a perquisite for 8th graders.

One of the second floor balconies overlooking the main corridor and the entrance to the cafeteria displays a long row of flags on individual staffs. The flags of countries such as Mexico, El Salvador, Poland, Nepal, and Israel represent just a few of the home countries of many Pin Oak students. The display honors those students and their families and publicly recognizes the diversity of the student body.



Sunlight pours through the lunchroom windows.

SMALL LEARNING ENVIRONMENTS

Consistent with middle school philosophy, Pin Oak's mission is to create small, personalized learning environments that are safe, promote mutual respect, support project-based learning, and provide choices for informed decision making for the success of each and every student. It does this through both scheduling and building design.

Following the Middle School model, small learning communities of 120-130 students have their core content classrooms in a single hall and share the same core content teachers. Arranging teachers' schedules so that these student

Student Demographics

Pin Oak Middle School, Bellaire, TX

www.pinoak.us

1,138 students, 6 – 8

African American	25%
Hispanic or Latino	47%
White	22%
Students eligible for free/ reduced price meals	49%
Students with Limited English Proficiency	7%
Special Education Students	10%
Student Turnover rate	9%
Average Teacher Turnover rate	17%
Student/Teacher Ratio	17:1

clusters and content-area departments have shared planning periods helps to maximize teacher time for meeting the personal learning needs of each student. Shared planning time also allows teachers to implement hands-on, active lessons and a project-based authentic assessment system. And students benefit because although they are often entering a larger school than their elementary school, they spend a great deal of their academic time in a less overwhelming, smaller cluster environment. This gives them time to acclimate themselves to secondary school life and its demands. Perhaps not coincidentally, student attendance rate at Pin Oak is 97%.

Pin Oak's population of approximately 1,150 is divided among Asian (6%), African American (25%), White (22%), and Hispanic (47%) students. The economically disadvantaged population is about 49% of the school student body, reflecting the diverse socio-economic levels of the parents and the surrounding neighborhoods.



Flags represent the many home countries of Pin Oak students.

FOREIGN LANGUAGE MAGNET PROGRAM

Pin Oak is a choice option for students living in one of three neighboring attendance zones and is also a foreign language magnet school. The magnet program began several years after the school opened but has steadily grown from a few students to its present size. It is not supported financially by the district but is considered a necessary part of Pin Oak's effort to remain competitive.

The magnet program comprises one student cluster in each grade level and it is instructive to see how students are selected. Students from any attendance zone in the district can apply for the magnet program. Families complete an application which asks for the students' 4th grade Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) and Stanford 10 scores. Additionally, the complete 4th grade report card and the first report card of the 5th grade are required. The school then scores and ranks applications; the top 130 sixth-grade students are invited to join Pin Oak's magnet program and the remaining applications go back to the sending attendance zones. The rest of Pin Oak's student body is selected by random lottery.

Pin Oak is one of more than 100 magnet schools that the Houston Independent School District (HISD) created to attract excellent students. To stay competitive, Pin Oak administrators examine their programs and practices constantly in order to keep the students in the public schools and to "create a place in the community," according to Principal Michael McDonough.

A CULTURE OF CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT

The school leadership has created coherence across all systems of the school in the service of very clear values. There is a culture of continuous improvement nurtured in the school, based on the core belief that every student can and will succeed. Everyone in the school—leaders, teachers, parents and students—use this belief to guide their actions and decisions.

Four factors appear to support this culture of continuous improvement. First, school leadership sets high expectations and respects the professionalism of the staff. Student choice is a second factor: Beyond the magnet program a multitude of clubs, teams, and activities beckon students. Third, teachers assume personal and professional responsibility for ensuring student learning. Finally, a strong community of parents, supported by continuous communication about student progress and opportunities for involvement in the life of the school, helps the school, and students, succeed.

THE MASTER SCHEDULE

One wall of a conference room is taken up with a large chart of the entire school schedule, all classes and activities noted in intricate color-coded detail. The chart, which took many hours over many days, is the work of Principal McDonough—“the scheduling genius” in the words of a staff member. This schedule—and the skill behind it—is key to Pin Oak’s success. The schedule not only accommodates the middle school model of teams and clusters but also allows for an advocacy period for clusters. This advocacy period is a common meeting time for clusters during which teachers can provide lessons on such subjects as leadership and citizenship, birthdays are celebrated, fund raisers are planned, weekly student cluster meetings are held, and students can take advantage of another opportunity to complete assignments or take part in a club. Every other week this 25-minute period is available to students to participate in one of some 50 clubs. These clubs are unique in that any student can suggest an idea for a club and simply needs to secure a faculty sponsor for the club to exist. The club will survive into the next semester if it continues to hold students’ interests. Many of these clubs become so popular or so interesting that they continue after school or on weekends.



Band is one of more than 30 available electives.

In addition to the core subjects, all 7th and 8th grade students have access to six foreign language course offerings, including Spanish for Native Speakers. Pin Oak also offers a wide array of performing and visual arts classes including but not limited to theatre, vocal music and stage, concert, and marching band. The school offers

more than 30 school-wide electives, some academic and some interest-based. Academic electives allow students to pursue special interests by adding a course to their required core program. The interest-based electives allow both teachers and students to creatively explore areas of special interest to them.

Another wall in the conference room displays a list of attributes that the school's leadership feels are necessary for the school to embrace in order for Pin Oak to continue to be a successful environment for both students and staff. Phrases such as high-caliber people, collaboration, voice in decisions, empowerment, freedom to be creative, diversity, master schedule, and planning time provide a focus for discussion when checking on the school's faithfulness to these best practices. This ongoing examination of practice exemplifies the school's culture of continuous improvement.

As the principal describes it, his leadership approach begins with the mindful selection of staff, beginning with a hiring process that includes a determination of what a new hire can bring to the school community. It continues through the creation of a culture and climate of opportunity and accountability for teachers and students through clubs and activities and maintains its momentum toward student success through the continual examination of school practices.

STUDENT OPPORTUNITIES

"Every student wants to learn here" remarks one of the students during a focus group. As he might have added, that every student wants to be here because they had to apply to the school for admission. Nevertheless, even under the best of circumstances there are always times when students need some extra help and Pin Oak seems to make it nearly impossible for a student not to be successful.

Through a school-wide advocacy program, Pin Oak has established a student data brochure for each student. An advocate meets with each student to review his or her results, set new goals, and lay out a course of action to achieve those goals. Students become involved in understanding the purpose and use of data and may take advantage of tutorials before, during, and after school, available to any student seeking extra help. Students who have forgotten or were unable to do their homework take part in a "mandatory opportunity" during the lunch period to stay current with their studies. The land that Pin Oak was built on formerly housed polo horses for a sport that was very popular in the area at one time, and, in an apparent nod to tradition, the school adopted the term "Stables" for this lunchtime opportunity.

Students speak enthusiastically about the freedom to create their own clubs, which meet during the school day. One student started a bowling club which continues to meet on weekends and holidays. Another group of



Pin Oak's soaring architecture reflects its aspirations for students.

students started a service club that examined opportunities for physically handicapped students at Pin Oak to take part in non-academic subjects such as physical education classes. As part of their project they even created (in partnership with a community-based agency) adaptive equipment for the students which has proved quite useful and successful.

The students all appear determinedly goal-oriented and their conversations turn often to their plans for the future. They appreciate Pin Oak's ethnic diversity because it exposes them to "other cultures and viewpoints,"—good preparation, they say, for later life. "You don't have to like everyone, but you can be okay with them" is how one student describes life at Pin Oak.

PERSONAL AND PROFESSIONAL RESPONSIBILITY

A professional learning community developing in the Science department is an example of the collaborative nature of the Pin Oak staff. One staff member describes it as a "coordination, alignment and professional support group." Another calls it "an opportunity to find out what every grade level is doing in science. We pass out information from the district. It is a time for give and take about what we are doing and what we should be doing. We talk about the common assessments."

In a recent professional learning community meeting, science teachers conducted an item analysis for each grade level. "We went through the objectives and found out which were missed by the students. We talked about how we can re-teach the material and shared teaching strategies," reports a teacher.

"We are open with each other about why the kids might not have gotten the concepts. We ask each other 'what did you do well in teaching this?' We are not afraid to ask each other questions. We feel safe enough to be able to say, 'I don't understand.' Our main goal is to help students to learn. That's always been the spirit of this school," explains a teacher. Another explains that the principal is not a micro manager. "He gives us the freedom and opportunity to teach. If it works, okay; if not, there is not a penalty as long as we can draw lessons from the experience."



Students have numerous opportunities to master key concepts.

There are common concepts at all grade levels that the teachers try to incorporate into curriculum maps. They meet weekly to confer on these concepts and agree on instructional strategies for presenting them. These concepts pepper student conversations and the hallway displays focus on them. "It helps kids learn—they are seeing and hearing it all around the school," a teacher says.

A first-year teacher describes her surprise when she appeared for her job interview at Pin Oak and was met by the principal and by a committee of her peers. She realized, she says, that in this school hiring practices are a collaborative event, and that the hiring committee was looking for characteristics in her presentation and responses to their questions that reflected that spirit of collaboration they felt was necessary to the school's success.

PARENT COMMUNITY

Parents are valued as an integral part of life at Pin Oak. And the high esteem that parents are held in by the school is reciprocated by the parents' positive attitudes towards the school. Parents gave the visiting team a variety of reasons for choosing Pin Oak for their children. One parent expressed gratitude that the school offered a safe place: "It is a school that offers a safe place for children until 6 p.m.," explaining that the large number of clubs and sports activities engaged students but that a supervised structured after school program is also available, for a fee.

Another parent praises the "communicative" teachers, remarking with pride that "my child is loving math again." Breaking the student body into smaller clusters also wins parents' approval: "[it] makes it feel like a small private school." Diversity is another parental selling point: "It's like living in a melting pot. I want my kid to experience a variety of people." Principal McDonough earns high praise, too. A parent says, "I can't say enough about the principal and the way he interacts with the staff and parents," and adds that the school balances academic and social opportunities, with a strong emphasis on discipline. "Children are expected to excel and have fun."



Hands-on activities reinforce student learning.

Parents recognize that the school leadership values creating opportunities for all students, noting that clubs meet in the middle of the day so they are available to all. Parents repeatedly cite the school's personal size, warmth, and positive tone: "The teachers and administrators really want to be here," a parent notes.

Pin Oak has a strong Parent Teacher Organization. Through a variety of fund-raising events, including a school store operated by parent volunteers where a variety of school materials are on sale, the parents contribute \$35,000 to \$40,000 annually to supplement the school budget. Each teacher receives up to \$200 for his or her school use and a large investment is usually made in technology to enhance instructional programs.

Students receive report cards every six weeks but the school also sends home comprehensive individual student progress reports every three weeks. Parents have access to blogs or cluster websites maintained by their students' team of teachers, where they can read relevant information about the school and classes. Finally, each parent receives a copy of the State Report Card containing school-wide assessment data, also available online.

Colorful and attractive, the parent section on the school website provides a wealth of information on topics as varied as student supply lists, summer academic assignments, resources of interest from grade-level parent meetings, counseling resources, and video clips as part of a presentation on the library and its resources.

DISTRICT SUPPORT

The positive culture in Pin Oak reflects the vision and perseverance of its principal, according to the Executive Principal, a district-level administrator responsible for supervising 12 schools, including two other secondary schools. Her position was created four years ago, in part as an attempt to share best practices from schools like Pin Oak with other schools in the district through networking opportunities.

Networking among schools, a new concept, continues to develop. Early dismissal four times a year allows teachers at the 12 schools to continue professional development with colleagues from the other schools. Pin Oak serves as co-facilitator for the Houston ISD middle school network, which meets every four to six weeks to focus primarily on sharing best practices around a specific topic.

The Executive Principal meets face to face with each principal as often as possible, looking for “big picture” issues. Pin Oak’s Principal McDonough is in a three administrator professional learning community which includes a one-day summer retreat whose purpose is to clarify priorities.



Principal Michael McDonough

CONCLUSION

Research tells us that no significant learning occurs in a school without strong relationships of mutual respect. It also confirms that there are specific ways in which schools can be structured and organized to develop and sustain relationships of mutual respect and to enhance learning. Pin Oak’s small learning environments have contributed in a large way to the ability of students and teachers to develop supportive relationships, especially for incoming students for whom the transition between schools can be traumatic.

Pin Oak has been able to virtually eliminate the reading achievement gap among subgroups. African American students in the 6th grade outperformed all other subgroups with a 99% passing rate. The largest gap that exists is a 4 point difference between white and economically disadvantaged students in the 8th grade.

The administration and staff of Pin Oak Middle school seem to have taken this research to heart and made it a part of the school’s fabric of success.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

- Would the students at Pin Oak have the same motivation to learn if it were not a magnet school?
- Are all the elements of the Pin Oak organizational and academic structure equally important to its success?
- Can the Pin Oak model of success be replicated at the high school level, where the greatest rate of student dropouts occurs?

Pin Oak Middle School					
Texas Standards Achievement Test					
% proficient and above: 8th grade English Language Arts					
	<i>2003-04</i>	<i>2004-05</i>	<i>2005-06</i>	<i>2006-07</i>	<i>2007-08</i>
All	86	89	96	97	100
Low income	76	82	92	95	100
African American	91	93	98	97	100
Hispanic	67	83	92	97	100
White	98	96	100	99	100
% proficient and above: 8th grade Mathematics					
	<i>2003-04</i>	<i>2004-05</i>	<i>2005-06</i>	<i>2006-07</i>	<i>2007-08</i>
All	56	61	73	84	93
Low income	36	48	70	79	91
African American	40	54	66	73	88
Hispanic	36	49	70	81	95
White	72	79	81	94	94