DALLAS, TX: Dallas ISD
SES Diversity through Specialty (“Transformation”) Schools

Dallas ISD has sought to increase socioeconomic (SES) integration by establishing brand new intentionally diverse schools of choice called “transformation schools.” There is one such school in the district currently: SOLAR Prep School for Girls, which is a K-8 all-girls STEAM (Science, Technology Engineering, Arts, and Mathematics) school near downtown Dallas in a gentrifying neighborhood. The school is housed in a school that had been previously closed for low enrollment. SOLAR Prep is currently its first year of operation. (See http://solarprep.org/) In August 2017, Dallas ISD will open its second transformation school that is geared for SES diversity, a new high school called City Lab, which will also be located near downtown.

City and District Demographics

The map on the left shows the median income of residents of Dallas neighborhoods. (Note: darker red = higher income) The map on the right shows the racial distribution on the city. As illustrated in the maps, low income people of color are concentrated in the southern part of the city, while affluent whites are primarily located just north of downtown in the community of Highland Park, which has its own separate school district (in dark red and blue on the left and right map, respectively.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Dallas ISD Student Enrollment (2015/16)</th>
<th>Count</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>111,165</td>
<td>70.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>7,836</td>
<td>4.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>35,834</td>
<td>22.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian or Pacific Islander</td>
<td>2,253</td>
<td>1.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Economically Disadvantaged</td>
<td>139,116</td>
<td>87.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>English Language Learner</td>
<td>67,996</td>
<td>43.9%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total Enrollment</td>
<td>158,495</td>
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</tbody>
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Dallas ISD has an increasing share of Hispanic students with declining African American enrollment. In addition, a 2012 district analysis found that 17% of the district's enrollment attends out of district charter or private schools.¹

History of Dallas’ Plan

Dallas ISD created the Office of Transformation and Innovation (OTI) in 2014, which is an office that focuses on pilot projects, including the expansion of school choice options. The district conducted a survey of parents to find out what kinds of school choice options parents would be interested in, and
received over 3,700 responses. They found that the most popular options were Early College, International Baccalaureate, and Advanced Placement. Families were also asked on the survey whether they would be interested in sending their children to schools of choice outside their attendance zones, and got positive responses for several of the models.

Based on the survey, the OTI developed a plan to establish 35 new schools of choice, divided between two school types: ‘schools of transformation,’ which would be brand new schools, and ‘schools of innovation’ which would be existing schools that would be redesigned and reopened under new concepts. The schools would be given significant autonomy from district regulations in curriculum, staffing, and budgeting.

OTI then sent out a call for applications to educators both within Dallas ISD and also nationally who were interested in proposing a new school under one of the two models. They asked principals who were applying to create a new school to choose from specified themes for their new model (i.e. Montessori, STEAM, etc.) To apply, schools were required to have support of a group of teachers, and for schools of innovation, to demonstrate community support for the model.

There are currently 5 transformation schools in the district, 2 of which are SES integration schools. The first SES integration school to open is SOLAR prep, which is an all-girls school created by principal Nancy Bernadino. She had originally planned, with several members of her team, to create a new STEAM school for girls located in southeast Dallas, the area in which she had already been working. However, the director of OTI at the time, who was advocating for the use of choice schools to create more SES integration in the district, requested that the school be located closer to downtown, in a gentrifying area that was losing enrollment, in order to strategically attract/recruit middle class families. The school was designated as the district’s first SES integration pilot school. Solar prep is only K-2 currently; the school will add one grade per year until they are a K-8 school.

City Lab High School will be the second SES integration school in the district. It is opening in August of 2017, beginning with 9th grade only and adding a grade level each year. Its focus will be urban planning, architecture, and community development. It will be located downtown.

Structure of Plan
Both Solar Prep and City Lab schools are open enrollment and open to all students in the district, regardless of academic ability and geographic constraints. City Lab will reserve 30% of its seats for out of district students in order to increase diversity of the student body.

Admission is by lottery to both campuses, with 50% of seats set aside for students who are eligible for Free and Reduced Price Lunch (FRL), and 50% for non-FRL students. The lottery is a blind, computerized process. The principal of SOLAR prep has noted that the set-asides have worked well because the demand for the school has soared among higher income parents - thus the 50% FRL set aside ensures that the school remains diverse by ensuring low-income students have access. (Indeed, the principal noted that the Dallas ISD Board of Trustees was concerned initially that the set-aside of 50% of the slots for higher income students would mean that low income students would be excluded. However, the principal notes that, without at least the 50% set aside, the school would have even higher proportions of high-income students than it does currently.) The principal says the wait list has a 3/1 ratio of high- to low- income students.

After admissions decisions occur, the district conducts an equity audit of the school, consisting of an analysis of the neighborhoods the school is drawing from, to ensure that all geographic areas of the district and all types of students are represented in the student body. The audit involves analyzing
all 808 Census Blocks in the district and placing each in one of four categories based on an index that includes: median household income; parental status (single/married); home ownership status (own vs. rent); and level of parental education attainment. Block 1 is the highest SES block, and Block 4 is the lowest SES block. The goal of the equity audit is to determine whether there are a proportionate amount of students from each type of block in the school, with a specific target that at least 25% of enrollment is from Block 3 (12.5%) and Block 4 (12.5%), the highest needs areas of the district. (In other words, the goal is to ensure that at least half of the 50% FRL low income students come from Blocks 3 and 4.) If this is not the case from the initial lottery, then additional students are added to the school to ensure that there is adequate representation of Block 3 and Block 4 students in the school. The district is willing to allow the school to go over capacity to ensure that there is such representation from both low income households and low income neighborhoods in the district. Below is a map of the block group analysis.

SOLAR Prep has achieved their targeted 50%/50% balance of FRL/non-FRL students, and the school is also racially diverse. According to district data (Fall 2016), the student population in the school is 50% Hispanic, 22% White, 23% African American and 2% Asian.

The district aggressively marketed the school in all communities, particularly in the lowest income neighborhoods, in order to drum up sufficient applications the first year. To ensure that it is as easy as possible for all parents, particularly low-income parents, to apply, parents are able to apply in multiple ways: on line, or via paper application, phone, or by texting a photo of the application to the district. There is a centralized application process for the schools, which means that the district (not the school) handles applications and admissions decisions. The principal of SOLAR prep noted that this has been helpful, in part because it meant that she cannot be subject to parental pressure for admission.

Transportation is provided to all students, regardless of SES status, within specific parameters. The district provides universal bus passes for high school students to facilitate transportation.

Policies and Practices for Intentionally Inclusive Learning Communities
The school has adopted a number of policies to ensure that the school is not only diverse but also equitable and culturally inclusive. For example, the school also ensures all classrooms are integrated (i.e. no separate, gifted classes.) The district has also required that the PTA reflect the diversity of the student population.
Sources and Further Reading


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