

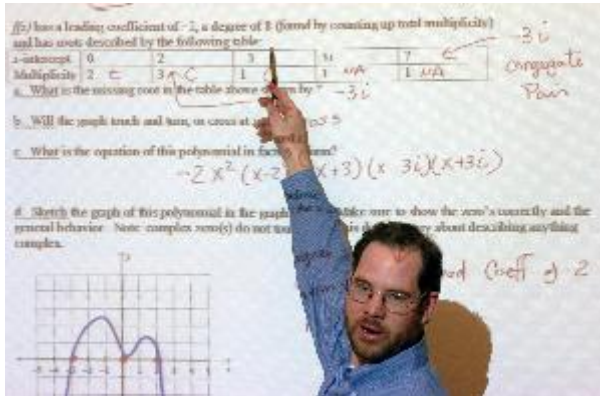
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Science-tech charter school a beacon to Texas reformers

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Denver School for Science and Technology teacher Mark Heffron explains a problem in his advanced algebra class. The charter school is one of only two rated "excellent" by the state. (The Denver Post)

One of Denver's highest-performing high schools will become a model for 35 new schools in Texas as they undertake a massive education reform project, administrators announced Wednesday.

The Denver School for Science and Technology, a charter school nestled in an affluent section of the Stapleton neighborhood, this summer will begin training teachers, principals and administrators from Texas about how the school pulls off such high test scores.

The school, which opened in 2004, is rated "excellent" by the state. Only one other Denver high school, the Denver School of the Arts just a few blocks away, has that ranking.

About 38 percent of DSST's 335 students live in poverty. The school is diverse: About one-third are Latino, one-third are African-American and one-third are white. The school has ninth-, 10th- and 11th-graders and will be a full high school next year.

DSST offers a small number of classes taught by teachers who specialize in a subject - rather than the "cafeteria-style" comprehensive high school. Almost all the students take the same core classes, and many of the school's few electives are taught by outside people.

For example, an engineer comes in to teach a computer-aided design class.

"The school really blew me away," said John Fitzpatrick, executive director of the Texas High School Project. "The whole culture and vibe and feeling of the school was phenomenal."

DSST's culture is unique. Almost every day opens with a schoolwide meeting where kids - standing in a circle - celebrate accomplishments. If a student gets in trouble, he or she often has to apologize to the group.

Students are also given grades on "values," such as integrity and responsibility.

The school, which has only about 100 kids per grade, rarely admits students after ninth grade because administrators prefer they start high school in that culture.

DSST is the model for new science and technology high schools being created in high-poverty areas in Texas using private and public money. Some of the schools will be new charters; some will be "new" schools within existing schools; and others will be a complete reform of an already-existing school.

The project, called "T-STEM" - or Texas Science, Technology, Engineering and Math - aims to prepare more students for careers in math and science. National studies show that U.S. students are woefully behind kids in other countries in these areas.

Texas officials will also be looking at San Diego's notable High Tech High.

DSST principal Bill Kurtz said teachers successfully bring kids up to grade level by tightly prescribing the classes they take, and trying anything and everything to make sure they learn.

"If we don't succeed, we do something different ... and not something different next year, but something different now," Kurtz said. "Whenever a kid doesn't pass ninth or 10th grade, our first comment to parents is that 'we failed you,'" he said.

At a news conference Wednesday, Kurtz said the school was exploring adding middle-school grades using a \$500,000 grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation.

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