

Twenty Years of Pre-k Success: An Overview of Spring Branch ISD's High-Quality Prekindergarten Program

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Beginning to Take Shape

Picture this setting: Young, eager four-year-olds actively engaged in the classroom science center, about to begin a fascinating science experiment. On a Friday evening, normally a time to enjoy the start of a weekend, parents participate in special training classes revolving around science, math, or literacy at the local pre-k school. In one classroom, a team of teachers (one Head Start, one Pre-k, and one Assistant Teacher) who have worked together for 8 years and describe themselves as "sisters," make their way from center to center, interacting with each group of students. Lastly, in a meeting, school administrators and school board members converge to discuss the impact of early education in their community and the opportunity to make it even better. Collectively, these events are what make one particular school district in Texas shine. There's no better way to put it, as one parent explains, "It's like a triangle---students, parents, teachers/administrators. Success is more likely when the triangle is fulfilled."

The Trendsetter in Early Childhood Education

According to recent U.S. Census reports, individuals of Hispanic origin make up the nation's largest racial group and fastest growing ethnic minority. By 2050, the projected Hispanic population will swell to over 102 million, approximately 24% of the U.S. population. Texas garners the top spot for the largest Hispanic population increase and largest percentage of residents who speak Spanish in the household. Houston, in particular, a bustling city recognized for being at the forefront of energy, medicine, and aeronautics, currently ranks third in the country for its large Hispanic population.

Spring Branch ISD (SBISD)---a district in the western section of the Houston area---observed and understood early on the changing demographics of the state and the looming need to provide high-quality early education for its exceedingly diverse, growing families. As a district that prides itself on success by embracing all cultures, backgrounds, and learning styles of children, Spring Branch has continued to show its

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SBISD Superintendent of Schools

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commitment to investing in early education by working together with local entities and opening its doors for all children in its community.

A District Overview

With close to 190,000 residents covering a 44-square mile area, Spring Branch includes a total of 32,000 students in its 26 elementary schools, 8 middle schools, and 7 high schools. In its most recent ratings from the Texas Education Agency, 9 campuses were rewarded an “exemplary” status and 16 were “recognized” campuses. Two of the District’s high schools, Memorial and Stratford, were newly honored by *Newsweek* magazine’s annual edition of “America’s Best High Schools” and ranked in the top 250 high schools nationwide. The District’s Westchester Academy for International Studies also received high praise and ranked in the top 1000 schools.



As a district made up of a wide range of families from different backgrounds, Spring Branch boasts a diverse student population of

approximately 53% Hispanics, 33% Caucasian, 7% African-American, and 6% Asian. Despite its status as a Chapter 41 school district, roughly 53% of the District’s students are under the Federal Free and Reduced Lunch Program and 30% are Limited English Proficient (LEP). A varied student population calls for the importance of having highly-skilled educators. Almost three-fourths of teachers in the District hold Bachelor’s degrees while over one-fourth attained Master’s degrees. In addition, 27% of SBISD teachers have 11 to 20 years of professional experience.

Twenty Years in the Making

A dedication to providing quality education and valuing the future of its children are one of the many hallmarks of Spring Branch. Therefore, it may come as no surprise that SBISD has been offering a prekindergarten program for over 20 years. Before 2001, the District provided pre-k education for those eligible as established by state guidelines. Later, the number of eligible children attending full-day pre-k in the designated elementary campuses in tandem with district leaders recognizing the important benefits and need for early education for all children, sparked the beginning of SBISD’s Early Learning Centers. The goal of providing an excellent education for its children and its aim for high academic achievement lay in the belief that the foundation of these goals is high-quality early education. In 2001, Spring Branch unveiled its four newly minted Early Learning Centers---Bear Blvd., Lion Lane, Tiger Trail, and Wildcat Way School---each

appropriately named after the mascots of the District's four original high schools. Along with the Early Learning Centers, Spring Branch also collaborated with a faith-based group to open the Panda Path School, located in the Family Development Center. Currently, the District offers full-day pre-k classes across 15 elementary campuses.



Spring Branch, reflecting the innovative characteristics of the city in which it resides, is believed to be the pioneer in the state to offer a full-access or access for all, full-day early education program. It also offers a half-day instructional program for 3 year-old special needs students. During 2001-2003, SBISD provided free full-day prekindergarten to all children in the District 4 years of age, a unique feature that ended by the 2003-2004 school year as a result of funding limitations. The District then launched a tuition-based plan for children wishing to attend pre-k but did not meet state guidelines. In comparison to other early childhood education programs in the area, the District still offered quality features at a lower price tag. With a true passion for providing early education for all children, and in order to ensure access to a variety of families, a scholarship program was introduced for those eligible families interested in enrolling in pre-k for their child. Annually, the SBISD pre-k program serves about 2000 children, including 83% eligible children, 15% ineligible children, and 2% on scholarships.

Planting the Seeds for Success

The concept statement for SBISD Schools for Early Learning is to:

Provide a quality, developmentally appropriate learning environment, which is inclusive of young children, educators, and parents.

The prekindergarten program strives to create a high-quality learning environment in a way that:

- *Consistently is child oriented, child directed and teacher facilitated;*
- *Establishes a strong academic foundation;*
- *Creates a safe, positive, and nurturing environment;*
- *Fosters self-confidence, awareness, discovery, and excitement;*
- *Builds collaborative, ongoing communication among educators, families, and the community; and*
- *Ensures seamless transitions.*

The District's enthusiasm and commitment to high-quality learning is geared toward the achievement of the whole child so that:

Children are successful and joyful learners; educators are supported and fulfilled; parents are partners in their child's educational experience, all to the benefit of the entire community.

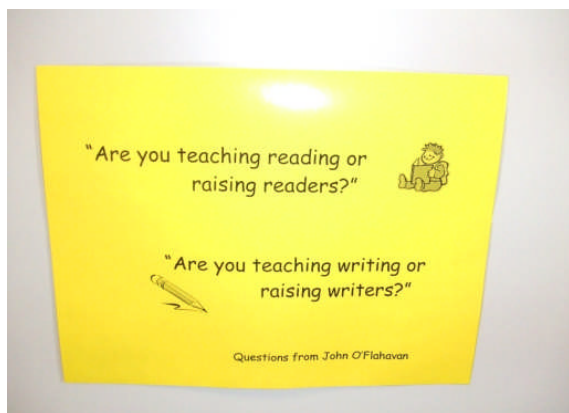
If You Build It, They Will Come

As mentioned earlier, the SBISD prekindergarten programs take place in classrooms in select elementary campuses as well as the five Schools for Early Learning. The state-of-the-art early learning facilities are independently located on campuses separate from other schools but are still close to nearby elementary feeder schools. Each school is designed to the specific needs of 4 year-old children, an aspect that highlights the District's promise to provide a developmentally appropriate environment for children. The four larger schools, Bear Blvd.,

Lion Lane, Tiger Trail, and Wildcat Way, are designed to have a free-flowing aura and open into a wide courtyard filled with tricycle paths, grassy play areas, hills for climbing, and a great playscape. In addition, classrooms feature developmentally appropriate materials, art and science areas, and a computer learning corner. The Panda Path School will accommodate approximately 170 children in 8 classrooms, and the four other pre-k centers will accommodate over 300 students in 17 classrooms. In show of its support to its educators and staff, the Schools for Early Learning also house a child care facility for district employees with young children. Furthermore, free bus transportation to and from school is provided for all the Schools for Early Learning and is guided by a teacher assistant riding the bus to make certain of each child's safety.

The Spring Branch Approach

A pioneer in pre-k education and collaboration. An appreciation for culture and language is displayed through the District's specialized pre-k classes, located at Cedar Brook Elementary. "The Gift of Two Languages," as the District calls it, is a dual language program for prekindergarten students. The program focuses on uniting native Spanish and native English speakers in a classroom while creating a strong foundation of learning and opportunity to enhance language skills. Upon completion of the pre-k dual language program, students may continue onto the two-way dual language program through the 5th grade.



The success of Spring Branch's pre-k program is in part attributed to the cooperation between local entities. Joint efforts among the District, child care groups, and Head Start were established before any state mandate for integration. The Spring Branch Head Start provider, Neighborhood Centers, Inc., offers Head Start in two of the early learning centers. The students must be three or four-years-old, live in the Spring Branch district, and meet Head Start eligibility requirements to join the program. Moreover, the District also collaborates with local child care groups by providing free bus transportation for all children needing to travel from the centers to the early learning public schools. This collaborative approach brings together neighboring entities and ensures that each child in the community receives the resources it needs to be fully successful.

A uniquely-designed curriculum. A core objective in the SBISD is to create self-motivated, lifelong learners through a curriculum that enhances a child's varying aspects of development while fostering a sense of success, self-esteem, and independence. Thus, Spring Branch believes that children learn best when the environment is:

- Nurturing and secure;
- Print-rich;
- Discovery-oriented;
- Arranged in learning centers;
- Provides an abundance of concrete material; and
- Safe, well-maintained and appropriate in meeting individual needs.

An enriching curriculum that nurtures each individual child's needs, talents, and development is essential to a winning early childhood program. The SBISD strongly believes that children learn best when a curriculum:

- Is integrated;
- Is developmentally appropriate;
- Addresses different learning styles;

- Provides for individual differences;
- Is flexible; and
- Is stimulating.

Jennifer Blaine, Associate Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, emphasized the significance of creating an instructional program with regards to the characteristics of the District. “We believe our district is so diverse. We are one district, with two totally different needs,” Blaine explained. Building on the District’s fundamental beliefs, the Spring Branch district-designed pre-k curriculum is specially tailored to the educational needs of its students. The program focuses largely on balanced literacy, hands-on math, and a project approach to learning science and social studies. This is evident in the various activities in the prekindergarten classrooms such as making grocery shopping lists, making time for science experiments, or baking gingerbread men after reading a story. Curriculum, in the eyes of Spring Branch, is similar to a road-mapping process. Using valuable assessment data, teachers are able to enhance each student’s learning experience by understanding where a child stands academically and from there, tailor instruction to the child’s learning needs. Assessments for prekindergarten children occur at three time points, the beginning, middle, and end of the year. A combination of an observation survey, developmental reading assessment, and a district-developed math assessment is used to plan teaching and instruction as well as observe a child’s development. Blaine believes that an important lesson to take from Spring Branch is simply to “know your kids and what they can learn.” “You have to develop your people, monitor them, and make sure they are making quality decisions for kids everyday,” adds Blaine.

“It’s not just about the program, it’s about the people.”—Dr. Jennifer Blaine

In order for young children of all backgrounds and experiences to become bright, successful,

and productive future citizens, it takes a genuine commitment by the community to work hand-in-hand in its mission to build a strong foundation of high-quality early learning for its children. Throughout my visit at Spring Branch, I felt fortunate enough to meet with parents, teachers, administrators, superintendents, and school board members who each addressed the important individual roles they play in the lives of every SBISD early childhood student, as well as the responsibility to work as a team to ensure the well-being of all children.



Parents. As an SBISD kindergarten teacher herself and parent of a daughter who attended pre-k, Hanne Rodriguez knows very well the value of a developmentally appropriate and enriching early childhood education. “You can see who has had quality pre-k. They come knowing their letters and sounds,” Rodriguez says. Other parents echo Rodriguez’s view of the high-quality work taking place at Spring Branch. At Hunter’s Creek Elementary, I met with a group of parents who have long admired the District’s quality prekindergarten program. One parent described a comical experience with her son who loved his pre-k so much that she had to hide his homework. Meanwhile, another parent spoke about her son’s struggles while attending a nearby private school instead of Hunter’s Creek pre-k. One mother reflected on her son’s (who is now in his teenage years) vivid memories of painting a Michelangelo and Ansel Adams project in pre-k. At the meeting, we had our own version of show and tell as one parent brought along her child’s pre-k memories

book. The book, a gift given by Ms. Ray of Hunter's Creek pre-k to each of her students at the end of their pre-k journey, is an encyclopedia-sized volume of memorable pre-k pictures, events, milestones, and important people in the child's life. As we all flipped through the book, it became more evident that the SBISD pre-k program not only impacts the child, but it also has important meaning to the parents. "One of the things I love about pre-k is the balance, common sense, and love that goes into the program," added one parent.

To further promote parental involvement in the school, SBISD parents attend the first day of classes with their child. This creates an opportunity to engage in meaningful relationships with the teachers and staff and provides parents with a glimpse of the program's curriculum in action. Spring Branch also offers more opportunities for parents to play valuable roles in their child's early learning experiences. On a regular basis, pre-k teachers hold parent workshops that focus on teaching a variety of skills such as how to read to their children. "Pre-k is not just a training ground for kids, it is a training ground for parents, too," expressed Sharee Cantrell, Director of Lion Lane.

Teachers, Administrators, and District Leaders. One of the main characteristics that speak volumes to the quality of the Spring Branch pre-k program are the excellent, highly-trained teachers and dedicated administrators involved in the children's everyday learning experiences. All of the Early Learning Schools have a director responsible for the overall operation of the program and a school improvement specialist whose goal is to work closely with teachers and students on enhancing classroom experiences. Plus, the Early Learning Schools include a registered nurse, a licensed counselor, and other staff on hand for children of special needs. In addition, each class has a maximum of 22 children and is led by a degreed teacher with early childhood and elementary certifications as well as English as a Second Language Certification. Highly-

qualified teacher's assistants also partner with the lead teacher to provide instructional support. As described by the Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction, Spring Branch seeks world-class teachers with a variety of skills. Teacher recruitment for SBISD has even stretched as far away as places like Puerto Rico. Furthermore, the professional growth of teachers is also a key element to SBISD's high-quality pre-k program. "Professional development has helped make teachers see themselves as learners," Cantrell said.

During my visit at Lion Lane School, Bear Blvd. School, and Hunter's Creek, I was able to observe the unique teacher-student interactions in the works. In one classroom, the children sat neatly on the floor holding miniature dry-erase boards, fully prepared to begin the day's lesson. The teacher asked the students what word did they learn the previous day. A few hands shot up, and one child announced, "I remember! It!" "How do you spell it?" the teacher asked. As the boy jotted down an answer on his board, he replied back, "I-T. Today *it* might rain."

The variety of learning opportunities and advanced growth of children in the SBISD pre-k program has even altered the way kindergarten teachers think of their way of teaching. As more pre-k students come ready to read and write by kindergarten entry, pre-k, as described by one Spring Branch kindergarten educator, "has raised the bar for all of us kindergarten teachers."



My last meeting included a visit with SBISD administrators and school board members. We listened to district leaders speak about their valued commitment and hope for a brighter future where high-quality pre-k becomes more accessible and affordable for all. “If we do pre-k well, we will see a difference, and we can make it where everyone wins,” said Duncan Klussmann, SBISD Superintendent of Schools.

Fulfilling the Triangle

The joint effort put forth by the District and local entities combined with the strong relationships between students, teachers/administrators, and parents are the keys to Spring Branch’s success. The continued support of all parts of the ‘triangle’ shines through the prekindergarten students’ accomplishments. For instance, SBISD pre-k students have exceeded the expectations of Texas’ pre-k guidelines. According to end-of-the-year reading data, 92% recognize 21 or more letters, 99% can write 2 or more words,

95% understand expected concepts of print, and 75% have sufficient reading skills to be assessed by the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA). In addition, students excelled above the District reading average well into kindergarten and first-grade. SBISD pre-k students have also outperformed other students who did not attend the program. High achievement among students who attended pre-k has also been observed in longitudinal data. In Spring Branch ISD, pre-k for all students is a winning program that truly believes in the notion that “the stronger the start, the better the finish.”

For More Information

To learn more about the extraordinary early learning taking place at Spring Branch ISD, please call the Spring Branch ISD Early Childhood Department office at (713) 365-4360 or visit their website at <http://www.springbranchisd.com/instruc/earlychild/pk.htm>.