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Three Dallas Schools Make Newsweek's Best 100 High Schools List - Tag High School Is #1!

By Patricia Hawke

In their May 8, 2006, issue, Newsweek listed their Best 100 Public Schools across the nation. They ranked the schools using a ratio of the number of Advanced Placement (AP) and/or International Baccalaureate tests taken by all students within a school, divided by the number of graduating seniors. The 2006 list was based on the 2004–2005 school year. Their aim is to acknowledge those schools that do the best job of preparing average students for college, regardless of their economic background.

Three Dallas schools made the list with one taking top honors. Dallas schools' Highland Park High School weighed in at number 18 with a ratio of 4.735. Dallas schools' Science and Engineering Magnet took honors at number eight with a ratio of 6.275. Dallas schools' Talented and Gifted (TAG) High School had a 14.128 ratio and ranked number ONE! What an achievement for the Dallas schools.

Located near downtown Dallas in an impoverished neighborhood, TAG exemplifies how a school can meet the Dallas schools' goals of providing an excellent education for each and every child. The racially mixed student body receives a high-level of learning that challenges each child to achieve. TAG focuses on getting students into college through AP courses, providing the same opportunities to its students as the wealthy private schools.

Some educators refer to schools like Dallas schools' TAG as a boutique school, catering to special interest while ignoring course variety. Educators, including those in the Dallas schools, have been demanding reform for over 10 years; yet, they cannot agree on what works. In the `80s, the thought was to make all students college ready through a rigorous core curriculum. In the `90s, school choice and testing became the norm. Now, some are calling for dumping the entire public school system; while others see smaller schools, class size, and a boutique focus as optimum.

Even when a plan is working as it is in Dallas schools' TAG High School, opposition still rears its ugly head. Some believe that the smaller school loses the social acclimation that the larger high schools provide. They say that maintaining quality is difficult and the coursework lacks substance. Proponents of Dallas schools' TAG say that these Dallas Schools' students get more teacher and counselor attention and the children are less likely to get lost in the crowd, which gives the students an edge.

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TAG is one of the Dallas schools that is committed to helping students achieve their best, encouraging each and every student to aim high. They stress the importance of attending college and try to make the AP as much a part of students' lives as music or hanging out with their friends. While only 30 percent of high school students across the nation take any AP courses at all, each TAG student is required to take at least one, with most students taking more.

Dallas schools' TAG and other boutique schools like it have increased the number of minorities taking AP courses, increasing their chances to attend college. According to the College Board, which administers the AP, four times as many Hispanics and three times as many Blacks took AP courses in 2005, as compared to 10 years ago.

Newsweek cited Dallas schools' TAG student Fanny Frausto, age 18, who has taken 16 AP courses and scored high on many of them. She scored a five on her final three-hour exam. Her transcript is definitely atypical for a public high school student, showing a seemingly impossible schedule of

classes. She attends MIT on scholarship in the fall of 2006.

Dallas schools' teachers at TAG go the extra mile for their students. They assist the youth in learning to meet deadlines, constructing essays and organizing their time, managing workloads, and dealing with the tension and nervousness students may feel during testing.

Schools that consistently have high achieving students and programs were not included in Newsweek's list. Their ratio formula only measures test participation, rather than testing success. Also, due to inconsistencies, the formula does not include drop out rates or state testing scores.

Patricia Hawke is a staff writer for Schools K–12, providing free, in–depth reports on all U.S. public and private K–12 schools. Patricia has a nose for research and writes stimulating news and views on school issues. For more information on Dallas schools visit

<http://www.schoolsk-12.com/texas/dallas/index.html>

High Sugar Sodas To Be Phased Out Of Dallas Schools

By Patricia Hawke

An agreement was reached this past spring with Coca–Cola Company, PepsiCo and Cadbury Schweppes to eliminate all non–diet soda and other sugary drinks from most public school vending machines, unless they have a nutritious value, such as juice and low–fat milk. The voluntary agreement, that affects all of the Dallas schools, was brokered by the Alliance for a Healthier Generation, a partnership between the William J. Clinton Foundation and the American Heart Association.

The Alliance pushed for the agreement in order to help curb childhood obesity. The three beverage makers agreed amid growing pressure from consumer and medical groups, who are concerned over

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the high obesity rate in children. They have been pressuring states to enact laws to restrict children's access to drinks with no nutritional value and high in calories.

The new agreement does not change the rules for elementary Dallas schools, where soda already is banned. It will eliminate soda from the middle Dallas schools, but high schools only will see the non-diet sodas removed.

Studies have shown that just one 100-calorie soda per day adds 10 extra pounds each year. The Alliance hopes the new agreement will help children control their weight. Thirty-five percent of Texas students, including those in the Dallas schools, are considered overweight or obese, according to a 2003 state study.

Nurses within the Dallas schools area already try to identify overweight students at risk of developing diabetes and refer them to doctors. Many believe this is only a first step. Some dietitians agree, noting that soda consumption often signals poor eating and exercise habits, too.

Many Dallas schools parents and students have voiced support of the new agreement, but believe the Dallas schools need to go further to curb the high carb and high fat foods that are served in their cafeterias, as well as the student candy bar fundraisers.

Many educators and consumer groups are not holding their breaths. Students will continue to be allowed to bring sodas from home, which many already do to avoid paying the vending machine prices. Commercial Alert, a nonprofit group that opposes commercialism in schools, believes the beverage makers will back out of the agreement, since it has no enforcement provision. They also criticized the beverage makers for waiting until the 2009–10 school year to completely enact the agreement.

Another problem to enforcing the agreement may well come from the Dallas schools. Over the past ten years, many school districts have signed contracts worth thousands or millions of dollars in revenue. Districts typically agree to sell one company's line of soda and other drinks in exchange for a share of the profits. Many Dallas schools rely on such profits to supplement their annual budgets.

Students in the Dallas schools may not see much immediate change in their vending machine choices, since the 2009–10 school year is three years away. Even under the contract, sodas will continue to be sold at Dallas schools events, such as band concerts, school plays, presentations, pageants, and sporting events.

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