

# City head of the class in school standards

Ann Ritter  
TODAY

## CORPUS CHRISTI, Texas

Wynn Seale Middle School was once so dysfunctional, and its students' performance so low, that school officials did the educational equivalent of throwing up their hands. They "disestablished" the school, brought in a new principal and let him handpick his teachers.

That was three years ago, when fewer than one in four Wynn Seale students passed state math tests. Today, 60% pass. Reading and writing scores are up almost as much.

Wynn Seale's kids come from the city's most gang-infested neighborhoods, so poor that 95% of the kids qualify for free or subsidized school lunches.

Stern discipline helped turn around this knot of low expectations. But the real key to better performance was a single-minded focus on establishing tough academic standards, a focus that has made this south Texas port city virtually without equal nationwide.

"Standards took the mystery out of learning," says Wynn Seale principal Richard Peltz. "Our kids know exactly what's expected of them. And they know we expect a lot. There aren't any more excuses."

The hue and cry for higher standards has gained momentum in the last decade behind corporate leaders, education reformers and politicians, including President Clinton. But the pace of school reform and the move to curriculums based on standards have been slow.

Supporters say tough standards are a way to inject consistency and competitiveness into American schools at a time when students change schools often, when the nation's employers knock schools for turning out unemployable graduates and when U.S. students' test scores trail those of Asian and European students.

Yet, not many schools have tough standards, and even fewer enforce them. Standards are a highly charged issue for school boards and state legislatures. Conservatives often object that the government is trying to dictate what should be taught. Liberals worry about how poor kids, minorities and immigrants will fare when the academic bar is raised.

### Little progress nationwide

The public seems to have no appetite for national standards. A Bush administration proposal to set national standards bombed. President Clinton is trying to jawbone the states, but progress is fitful. Of standards that do exist — state or local — few are world-class.

Corpus Christi, however, stands out as an example of what can be done when there is the will to do it. No large school district has pushed the envelope the way this city has. It has set standards for what its 42,000 students should know and be able to do in every subject in every grade — from dates, facts, trends and concepts to problem-solving, experimentation and essay-writing. And it demands that teachers teach them and students learn them.

As simple as that sounds — as fashionable as it sounds — it's not happening to the degree that education reformers say it should if the nation's schools are to rise above mediocrity.

"What we still see is that it's going to take more than just talk to arrive at high-quality standards," says Matt Gandel, director of education issues for the American Federation of Teachers.

The teachers union, behind its late president Albert Shanker, has long pushed for tougher standards, and it keeps track of progress. Its annual review last year found that only 15 states have standards in math, English, science and social studies "that are clear, specific and well-grounded in content."

Two states — Iowa and Wyoming — have no standards at all. In 12 states, standards in all four core subjects fail to meet the teachers-union criteria. The remaining 21 states and the District of Columbia have standards that fail in one, two or three subjects.

Most states that have set standards, whether rigorous or not, don't take the critical extra step of requiring students to pass tests based on them. So there's no guarantee schools will use the standards.

And many standards simply don't measure up because they're too vague, wordy or all-inclusive to be useful as practical learning guides.

An example, from Oregon, that falls short: Students are required to "demonstrate the ability to think critically and creatively in solving problems." And one from Corpus Christi that measures up: "Analyze the development of individual rights in the United States from 1865-present."

Texas' standards meet teachers-union criteria in all four subjects, and students from grade three on take state English and math tests annually. But students don't have to pass the tests to be promoted. And although students must pass a high school exit exam to graduate, it is based in part on eighth-grade, not 12th-grade, standards.

Corpus Christi's standards not only are more rigorous than Texas', but students have to master them to graduate.

### Pushing for change

So how is it that this oil and petrochemical hub, the nation's sixth-busiest port, a middle-sized city with a Hispanic majority, has moved to the forefront of the academic standards movement?

Employers were complaining that high school graduates lacked basic skills. More than half the graduates who enrolled in a community college were taking at least one remedial class. "Basically there was no consistency in what was being taught," says Sandra Lanier-Lerma, assistant superintendent for instruction.

"I have five Biology I teachers," says King High School principal Sherry Blackett. "There was no way to be sure that students got the same amount of instruction in the most important things."

The realization touched off a two-year crusade that brought together parents, teachers and experts. The final product: *Real World Academic Standards* — 50 pages of the stuff students must know and how they are to show they know it, from pre-kindergarten through 12th grade.

King and 22 other schools tested the standards in 1995-96. All 61 schools adopted them this school year, and every student was immediately accountable.

"Last year no one really liked them," says junior Morgan Switzer, 17. "This year it's a lot easier."

"You study for the performance standards, you learn the information to pass them and then you retain the knowledge much longer than if you had just crammed for an exam."

Senior Hillary Towers, 18, says, "You know exactly what you're supposed to be learning, and you know you have to learn it by the end of the year. You're prepared for it."

### Some high school parents balked when their children failed to master

standards and lost sports and extracurricular eligibility under Texas' no pass, no play rule.

"We told them student achievement is non-negotiable," Blackett says.

To the surprise of many, the district's overall course failure rate is down slightly this year. The presumption had been that more students would struggle under tougher standards. "Kids will rise to the expectations you set for them," Superintendent Abelardo Saavedra says.

But Corpus Christi's transition was helped by other elements of its standards initiative that experts say are crucial to success:

▶ A discipline code, which stripped away disruptions to learning. Anything that smacks of gang influence — certain caps and jewelry, untucked T-shirts with baggy pants — is banned.

▶ Regular testing that determines whether the standards are being taught. Students must show their mastery of standards as they learn them. Grades don't hinge on one big final exam.

▶ Programs that kick in quickly to help students who are falling behind — before-school and after-school tutoring, Saturday classes and "clustering" students who are struggling with the same standards. Summer school was restructured so students go just long enough to pass standards they had failed.

▶ A ban on "social promotion," allowing students to advance from grade to grade whether they pass. "On the social promotion issue, few if any places match up to Corpus Christi," says Gandel of the teachers union.

Outlawing social promotion may be the best insurance that standards are met, but few districts have the stomach for it. Some experts think the emotional distress children suffer when they're held back is worse than the academic repercussions of promoting kids who fail.

They don't buy that in Corpus Christi, although the real test of the

policy won't come till the end of this school year, when for the first time students could be held back for failing standards. Linda Bridges, president of the teachers union local, says teachers are anxious to see whether the district follows through.

Saavedra says: "We're not going to socially promote."

### Taking the next steps

Across the district, there's a level of cooperation that outsiders say is rare in an education bureaucracy. A key to success is that teachers had a central role in drafting the standards.

As a result, Corpus Christi has moved on to issues that aren't even on the radar screens of most other districts. Grading, for example. It became apparent that the best set of standards could fall prey to the grading quirks of teachers. Corpus Christi is now experimenting with scoring criteria for every standard.

Teachers also are shifting to more active and hands-on learning. A buzzword districtwide is "products" — charts, portfolios, displays, demonstrations, research — that students create, often in teams, as they learn. Students are more motivated.

Corpus Christi is trying to incorporate more reading, writing and math into the other subjects. Until high school, you don't take English, you take "language arts," a combination of reading, writing, speaking and listening. A reading course is required for all high school freshmen.

Teachers find that some textbooks no longer measure up to Corpus Christi standards, and that has put a premium on finding other resources. Now it's not just social studies teachers requesting maps for classrooms; language arts and science teachers want them, too.

Math gets a huge push. A goal is that all students pass algebra by eighth grade. Computation takes a back seat to problem-solving. "If students can verbalize about math, they retain it longer," algebra teacher Jerrie Barker says. "What we had been doing was not working."

The district has no meaningful data yet to prove that tougher standards are raising performance. And it may not have any for a few years, because standards are not a quick-

fix. Lanier-Lerma is quick to point out that some schools, and some principals, lag behind others.

But anecdotal evidence is encouraging. Test scores seem to be heading up. Blackett says some of last year's King High graduates who resisted standards the most have come back to tell her they were wrong that they benefited from a single year of higher expectations.

Most teachers are believers. "Before, you closed your door and you didn't want anyone to know what you were doing," says Ann Rail, a seventh-grade language arts teacher. "Teachers used to keep their successes to themselves. Now we want to share our successes."

In just two years, standards clearly are driving public education here. They dominate school meetings. Banners and posters everywhere preach standards. Teachers laminate them and post them in classrooms. Students know what they have to master and when. Parents

are becoming familiar with them.

"We're after higher-order thinking skills," says Wynn Seale principal Peltz. "We're used to hearing teachers say, 'Tell me, listen, restate.' Now we're hearing 'Evaluate, create, defend, justify, give reasons.'"

Peltz and his teachers have made a lot of progress with Wynn Seale's at-risk student population. But he thinks taking them to the next level, the district's goal of 90% passing state tests, will be much harder. "Anyone can take a school to 60% or 70%," he says. "The research says we're going to plateau next year, and the kids will slip."

"So we'll try more radical strategies. Maybe extend the day, regroup children every other day. Teach, assess and regroup. The paradigm is going to have to be broken by the parents. Maybe the parents of under-achievers will have to come to school once a week, learn how to help their kids with homework. "We'll have to be more radical."

*Edue Success Stories*

# Senate votes next week on chemical arms treaty

The Senate agreed Thursday to vote on the chemical weapons treaty next week, but also passed a separate bill that some view as an alternative to the international pact. The Clinton administration has pushed hard for ratification of the treaty to ban chemical weapons, which has been approved by 72 nations.



Biden: Bill is no substitute for treaty

But Foreign Relations Chairman Jesse Helms, R-N.C., an opponent, has slowed progress on it. Under a new agreement, the Senate will open 16 hours of debate on the treaty Wednesday with a vote Thursday. Separate votes will be held on several amendments that could kill the treaty.

A separate bill that the Senate passed on a party-line vote would ban chemical and biological weapons within the USA, impose penalties on violators and require sanctions against other countries that use such weapons. "Clearly, it is not a substitute" for the treaty, said Sen. Joseph Biden of Delaware, senior Democrat on the foreign relations panel.

**FEC SEEKS RECORDS:** The Federal Election Commission has subpoenaed the 1992 campaign of former president George Bush to provide documents the FEC wants for its lawsuit that charges the Christian Coalition illegally promoted a number of Republican candidates in the early 1990s. The 1990 campaign of Sen. Jesse Helms, R-N.C., also was subpoenaed, said Christian Coalition lawyer Jim Bopp. — Chuck Raasch

**AGENCY CHANGES:** A reorganization of Cold War foreign policy agencies would put the Arms Control and Disarmament Agency and the U.S. Information Agency into the State Department. The Agency for International Development, which distributes foreign aid, would remain independent. — Lee Michael Katz

**WHITWATER:** Former White House chief of staff Thomas "Mack" McLarty appeared before a Little Rock federal grand jury investigating payments to Whitewater witness Webster Hubbell. McLarty, now an adviser to President Clinton, tried to find private jobs for Hubbell in 1994 before he resigned from the Justice Department while under investigation for bilking his former law partners. Hubbell pleaded guilty and agreed to cooperate with Whitewater prosecutors investigating Clinton's Arkansas business dealings. Prosecutors want to know if the attempts to find work for Hubbell were intended to keep him from cooperating.

In St. Louis, Whitewater independent counsel Kenneth Starr urged a federal appeals court to uphold the convictions of Susan McDougal and former Arkansas governor Jim Guy Tucker for Whitewater crimes. "The evidence is not slim, in fact it is overwhelming," Starr told the judges. McDougal and Tucker say their convictions are tainted by various errors during the trial.

**N.Y. POLITICS:** Gov. George Pataki said he's dumping Lt. Gov. Betsy McCaughey Ross from his re-election ticket next year, citing her "outright refusal to work as part of our united team." The two have disagreed on a number of issues, including health care and education financing. Possible replacements, Pataki said, include state Supreme Court Justice Mary Donohue and Parks Commissioner Bernadette Castro. McCaughey Ross had no immediate comment, but there has been speculation she might launch a primary challenge to Sen. Alfonse D'Amato, who pushed Pataki to run four years ago.



McCaughey Ross: Cut from ticket

Democratic Rep. Charles Schumer entered his party's race to challenge D'Amato, a three-term Republican incumbent. Several other Democrats also are running. Schumer has about \$5 million in his war chest; D'Amato has about \$6.8 million.

**BUDGET TALKS:** Senate Democrats, in what one described as a near revolt, told White House officials to stop making concessions in budget talks with Republi-

cans until GOP lawmakers make new offers. Many want to force Republicans to write their own balanced budget, which could be used against them in elections because it likely would have deeper spending cuts than a bipartisan plan. Budget talks resume Wednesday. — contract-guidelines friendlier to labor unions. No further meetings are planned.

**CORRECTION:** Among political contributors in a list Thursday from *Mother Jones*, Jon Corzine says he did not go on a Commerce Department trade mission.

## Powell: No warning of chemicals

Retired general Colin Powell, the top U.S. military leader during the Persian Gulf war, told the Senate veterans committee that he never got a CIA warning that chemical weapons might be present when U.S. troops blew up an Iraqi arms dump after the 1991 victory.

"None of us," Powell said, "had any reason to believe that the blowing up of these bunkers was exposing our troops to a hazard for which they were not prepared."

Strikes by U.S. and allied warplanes on Iraqi chemical and biological weapons sites are part of a broader inquiry into what may be causing the chronic illnesses afflicting thousands of Gulf War veterans.

Powell, who was chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, said he was frustrated at how long it took to get information about chemical exposure incidents.

"If I was still in office I would be raping and pillaging throughout the intelligence community to get to the bottom of this," Powell said.

Written by Paul Leavitt with staff and wire

**CHILD CARE:** President Clinton and first lady Hillary Rodham Clinton joined researchers and child-care experts at the White House Conference on Early Child Development and Learning to highlight the benefits of early nurturing of children by parents. The Clintons also used the occasion to push for more spending on early education, child care and health care.

## FUND-RAISING PROBE:

Attorney General Janet Reno rejected Republican criticism of her decision not to seek an independent counsel to investigate accusations of illegal fund-raising by the Clinton-Gore campaign and the Democratic Party. She said a Justice Department task force is continuing its investigation. "At this point, we can't find specific and credible evidence that any covered person... has violated a federal law," Reno said. "I'm damned if I do and damned if I don't, and so the best thing I can do is ignore the politics, ignore the pressures." — Gary Fields



Reno: Says she is ignoring politics

**PAPER WAR:** The Defense Department, which uses nearly two-thirds of the 20 billion sheets of office paper the federal government buys each year, will save a few trees and a few bucks by using recycled paper for copying and printing. The Pentagon's Sherri Goodman says the move will save about a nickel per 5,000-sheet pack. Over a year, that's 150,000 trees. — Steve Komarow

**HERMAN NOMINATION:** President Clinton and Senate Republicans remain deadlocked on Clinton's nomination of Alexis Herman to be Labor secretary. GOP lawmakers won't allow a vote on her until they get some answers to objections they have about a Clinton plan to implement executive orders to make federal



By Gary Cameron, Reuters

Powell: No reason to believe troops were exposed to hazard