

# The University of Texas College of Education PK-12 Schools



The University of Texas at Austin  
College of Education

ANNUAL REPORT 2024-2025



# The University of Texas College of Education PK-12 Schools



## Vision

To be a national leader in university-based K–12 education where every student is empowered by cutting-edge teaching and collaborative research that shapes the future of education in Texas and beyond.

### LEADERSHIP

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SUPERINTENDENT, UT UNIVERSITY CHARTER SCHOOL SYSTEM

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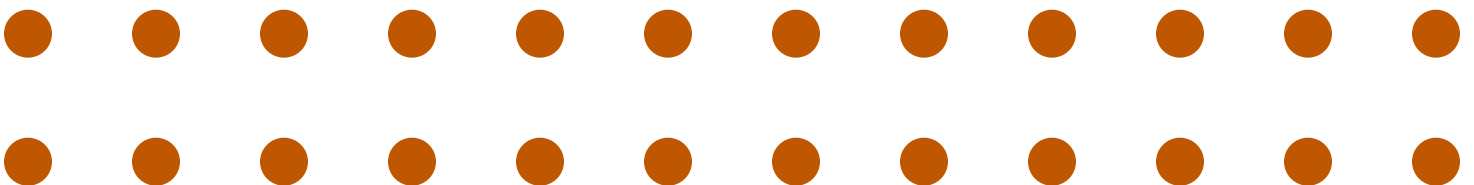


## A Milestone Year for The University of Texas PreK-12 Schools



The 2024-2025 academic year began an exciting transition as The University of Texas PK-12 Schools brought together UT Elementary School, UT Charter School and UT High School under the portfolio of the College of Education.

Each school maintains its own complementary identity, mission, and vision — all aligned with the values of the College of Education and The University of Texas at Austin. But the real news is that we have created a united team that leverages cutting-edge research, pedagogical excellence and an unwavering commitment to student success.





## STUDENTS ARE OUR FOCUS

Behind every statistic in this report is a story of meaningful teaching and learning. Our 400 dedicated educators don't just teach—they ignite potential in thousands of students across Texas and beyond. From elite athletes and scholars to children in foster care, from students in rehabilitation hospitals and juvenile justice facilities to students on more traditional education paths, we meet learners wherever they are and nurture their academic success.

What sets us apart isn't just our distinctively different student body, but our growth mindset, pursuit of educational innovation, and true connections with the communities we serve. We harness the intellectual resources of The University of Texas at Austin's College of Education, translating groundbreaking research into classroom reality. Whether through differentiated instruction, flexible learning environments, or intensive professional development, we're redefining what's possible in education.

Our impact extends far beyond our own walls. School districts across Texas tap into our expertise for professional development and flexible learning solutions, creating ripple effects that make a difference statewide.

## THE NUMBERS TELL OUR STORY

The outcomes speak for themselves—but they're just the beginning. As you explore this annual report, you'll discover remarkable achievements, innovative programs, inspiring success stories and ways we help connect The University of Texas to students, families and schools statewide.

This is transformative education in action.

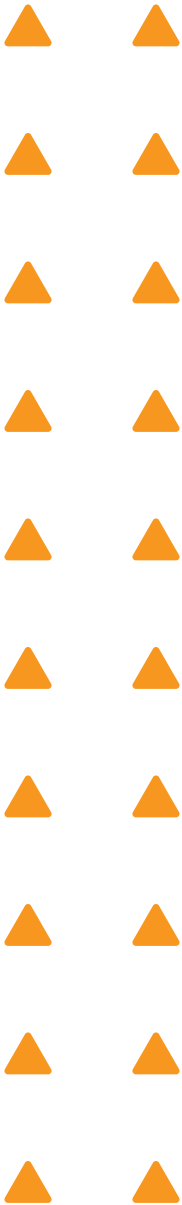
**Melissa Chavez, Ph.D.**

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR

UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS COLLEGE OF EDUCATION PK-12 SCHOOLS



# UT Elementary



“As UT Elementary proudly entered its 21st year, we celebrated another remarkable year marked by increased student engagement, deeper community involvement and a strengthened research partnership with Big UT. Our school continued to embrace innovation, creating dynamic learning environments where every student is empowered to thrive. These achievements are a testament to the dedication of our educators, the enthusiasm of our students and the unwavering support of our community.”

**Nicole Whetstone, Ph.D.**  
SUPERINTENDENT



“The 2024–2025 school year was an incredible one for UT Elementary. We hosted our first-ever Beautification Day, which brought families, staff and students together to strengthen our sense of community while improving our shared spaces. We also built exciting new partnerships, including with NASA. It culminated in a fantastic Space Day that inspired our students to dream big and see themselves as future innovators and explorers. We proudly renewed several of our research partnerships with Big UT, deepening the ties between our school and the university. We were thrilled to welcome visiting UT athletes and the UT Cowboys organization, whose volunteering and mentoring mean so much to our students and staff. The year reflected the joy, growth and dedication of our campus, and I could not be happier to work beside the students, staff and families here at UTES.”

**Lara Wilder, Ed.D.**  
PRINCIPAL

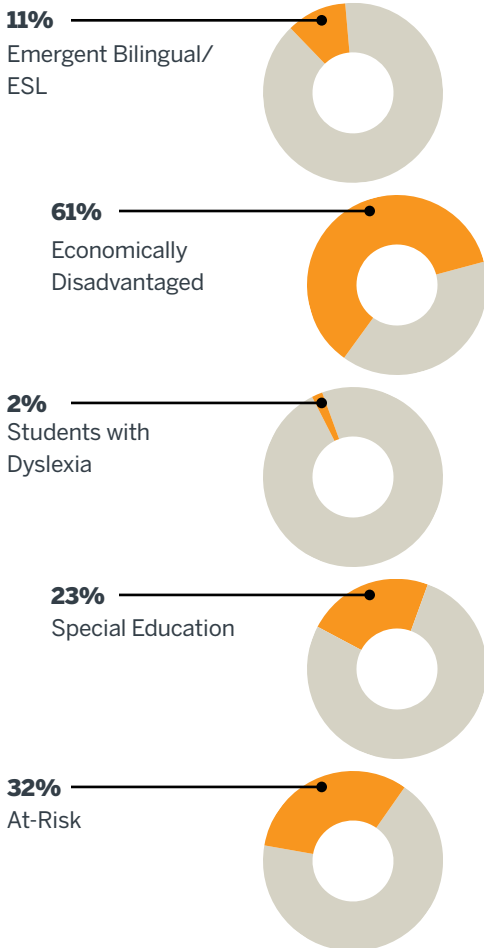


## 2024-2025 UT ELEMENTARY SCHOOL STUDENT DATA

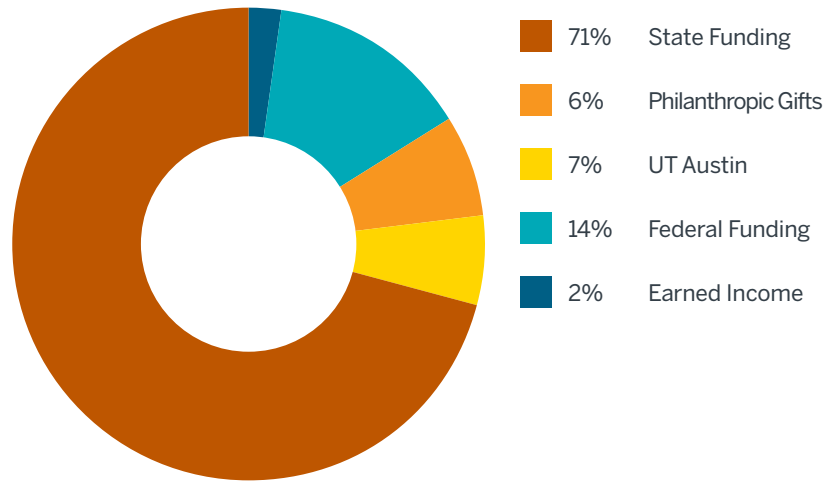
Demographics	Percentage
Hispanic	65%
American Indian/Alaskan	<1%
Asian	2%
African American	12%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	<1%
White	16%
Two or more	4%

**Total Student Count 318**

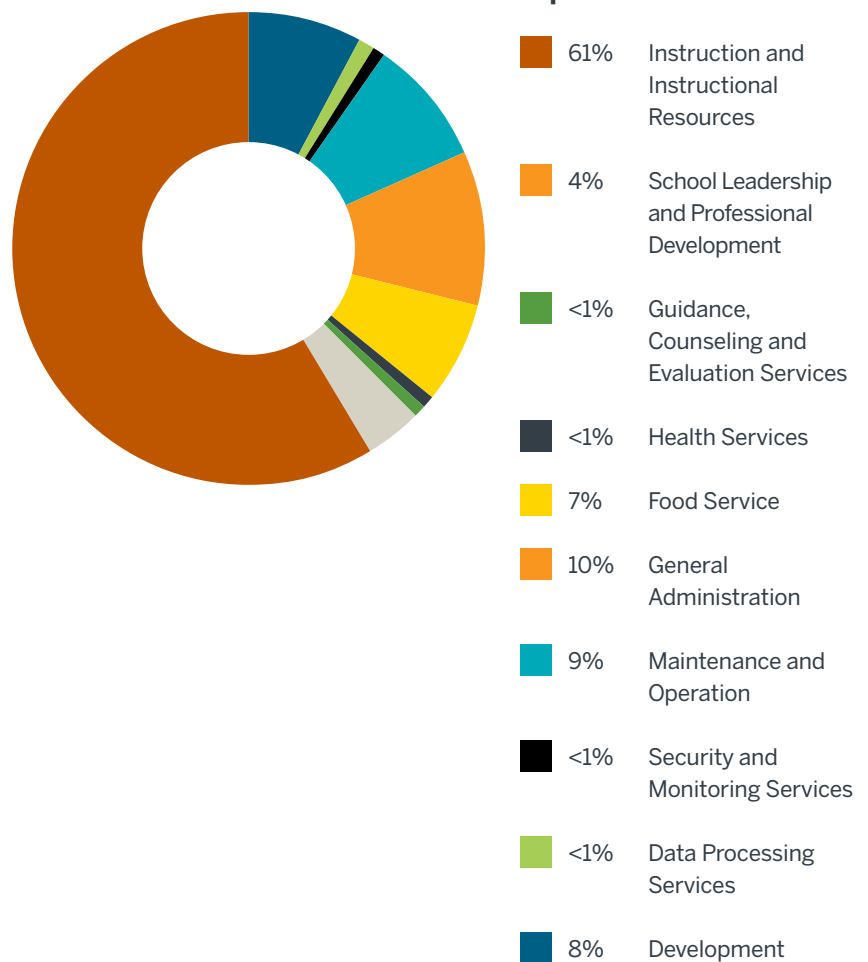
### Population



### Revenue



### Expenses





## A Day that Defied Gravity

We believe that sometimes the greatest inspiration in life can happen on an elementary school campus. Never was this more true than March 24 when NASA came to UT Elementary.

Coordinated by STEAM teacher Kameron Koeffler, multiple units of NASA, along with the Texas Space Commission, Lockheed Martin and the UT College of Education helped transform our school into Mission Control for a day.

That day students weren't just at school anymore — they were astronauts, engineers and space pioneers. The hallways buzzed with excitement as Pre-K through 5th graders embarked on simulated missions that real NASA scientists tackle every day.

### THE MOON AT THEIR FINGERTIPS

Students came face-to-face with an authentic lunar sample, one of only eight moon rocks in the entire world available for public interaction. This wasn't just a science lesson; it was a bridge spanning 240,000 miles and 50+ years of space history, connecting the Little Longhorns directly to humanity's greatest adventure.

Guiding robot rovers through simulated terrain, students grappled with the same engineering challenges that keep NASA scientists up at night. Would their rover navigate the rocky surface? Could they complete the mission? Every success was met with cheers!

### STEPPING INTO TOMORROW

The NASA Space Trailer became a time machine, whisking students from the historic Apollo missions to the future Artemis II launch that will return humans to the Moon. Meanwhile, VR headsets transported them miles above Earth, offering an astronaut's view of the Earth spinning in outer space.

"When NASA came to UT Elementary, our students experienced the magic of discovery and the power of possibility. They weren't just learning about space, they were living it. We're proud to have built this partnership with NASA and hope it opens many years of opportunity and inspiration for our students," said principal Lara Wilder.

She added, "Our students now don't wish upon the stars but are reaching for them instead — the true power of STEAM programming!"

# From Little Longhorn to Advocate:



## How Maricarmen Marquez's Journey Came Full Circle



Some stories begin where they end. For Maricarmen Marquez, that place is The University of Texas — first as a bright-eyed student at UT Elementary School, and now as a senior who will earn her Psychology degree in May 2026.



### FOUNDATIONAL YEARS AT UTES

Her education journey began with beloved UT Elementary teachers who made school exciting and fun. From classroom teachers to STEAM classes, gardening, and the Strings Project, Marquez learned lessons big and small. "UT Elementary taught us so many things—you felt like you could do it all," she said.

The annual fifth-grade field trip to the Texas State Aquarium initially sparked dreams of a career in marine biology, but it was other lessons that would ultimately shape her path.

"I think UT Elementary made me a very conscious and empathetic person, because we were always talking about how to help the earth, how to help your friend, how to be there for someone going through something, and standing up for what is right," Marquez reflected.

Even as a fifth grader participating in the Walk for Water fundraiser, she understood something profound about service. "When you fill someone else's bucket, you are also filling your own — it's like paying it forward," she said at the time.


### FINDING HER PATH

After UT Elementary, Marquez attended the Ann Richards School and then the Liberal Arts and Science Academy (LASA). High school left her feeling uncertain, and those marine biology dreams faded. First attending Austin Community College and the University of Houston, she eventually found her way to UT Austin, where psychology reignited her passion.

"Last semester I was in a class about behavioral interventions," she said enthusiastically. "Seeing how a simple word could change a student's complete outlook — that was inspiring."

Now preparing for graduate studies in cognitive development and child psychology, Marquez embodies those fifth-grade lessons. The little girl who learned empathy at UT Elementary is ready to pay it forward, advocating for and helping students who need it most.





# Research Study Could Spell Student Success

It's after 3:00 p.m. at UT Elementary School, and most kids are excitedly running around the playground as they wait for their parents. But a few students head into the library, happy to drop off their backpacks, grab a quick snack, and meet with their tutors for 20 minutes.

These students were part of a research study — Spelling High Frequency Irregular Words Efficiently (SHINE) — underway at the school in partnership with The University of Texas at Austin Meadows Center for Preventing Educational Risk.

## THE PROBLEM THAT SPARKED THE STUDY

Emma Shanahan, the study's principal investigator, became interested in studying spelling while teaching fifth grade in a South Memphis turnaround school. Some of her students were so far behind that despite being in fifth grade, they should have been in seventh grade based on their age. These students struggled to identify letters and lacked foundational literacy skills.

Sharon Vaughn, executive director of the Meadows Center, suggested that Shanahan partner with UT Elementary for the pilot randomized control trial. UT Elementary teachers and administrators helped identify students who needed additional help with their literacy skills, dividing them into a control group and an intervention group.

## HOW SHINE WORKED

Every Tuesday, Wednesday and Thursday after school for 20 sessions total, fourth and fifth graders who needed additional literacy instruction met with tutors in the school library. The tutors were former teachers who missed being in the classroom.

Through structured spelling activities, the tutors introduced new words to students, including information about the irregular parts of each word. They helped students learn pronunciation and provided context about the word's meaning and usage. Other activities included using letter cards to build words, word memorization exercises and writing races where students worked together to earn points.

By the end of the school year Shanahan had compiled promising data from the study.

“We found that when upper elementary students practiced spelling tricky academic words through the

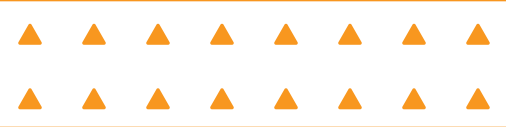


“When I came to UT Austin’s Meadows Center as a postdoc, I was really interested in seeing how spelling could be a vehicle to improve reading for these older elementary students,” explained Shanahan. “We know it works for younger students, but it hadn’t really been tried yet for older kids.”

SHINE program, they became much better at spelling not only the words they were directly taught but also new words that used the same building blocks,” she explains.

“This suggests that giving students focused practice with word parts like prefixes, suffixes and root words can give them tools to tackle many other words they encounter in school.”

# Librarian Jan Evans Closes the Chapter to a Successful Career



When librarian Jan Evans closed the door behind her at the UT Elementary library May 30, 2025, she also closed a chapter on her long career as an educator. At 71, she retired after 21 years at the school.

A University of Texas College of Education graduate, Evans held various teaching positions before former principal Ramona Treviño recruited her to teach second grade at UT Elementary in 2004. It was the school's second year and the first year second grade was offered. Evans had previously worked with Treviño at Zilker Elementary in Austin and Dahlstrom Intermediate School in Buda.

Already in her fifties when she arrived, Evans thought she might work a few years then retire. But she loved the school's mission so much that she stayed. "Never in my wildest imagination did I think I would

be here for 20 years," says Evans. "I just truly believed in the mission we started with: Students just needed the right supports to succeed."

After the school departmentalized, Evans taught math and science. Five or six years later, when the opportunity to establish a library arose, Evans stepped up. At the time, the state didn't require an MLS degree for school librarians, so Evans taught herself. "Just like I taught myself to do everything else — be a parent, cook, play the guitar, crochet..." she says, laughing.

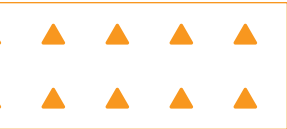
As someone who loves reading, being the librarian was a natural fit. "As the librarian, all the students are my babies. I get to read books to them and teach them lessons, like how to be a good person. They all love me, and I never have problems with misbehaving. I give them a LOOK and they behave," she says.

"One of my talents is connecting with kids who are troubled and having a hard time. Once I connect with them, this can be their safe place."

Beyond her librarian duties, Evans served as GT testing coordinator, screening every second grader for the gifted program, assisted with math and reading interventions and helped other Central Texas campuses within the UT Charter School System by providing needed books.

"Jan Evans has been part of the heart and soul of UT Elementary since day one," says Melissa Chavez, Executive Director for the UT Charter School System. "Her warmth, wisdom and deep love for books created a space where every child felt seen, heard and inspired."





# Teacher of the Year AJ Marks Strikes a Creative Chord for Students



A.J. Marks, UT Elementary's 2025 Teacher of the Year, brings a passion for music and a commitment to student-centered learning that resonates far beyond his classroom. A talented multi-instrumentalist, Marks has broadened the school's music program to include computer-based music production and an afterschool ukulele program, creative additions that have opened new doors for student expression and engagement.

Marks' dedication extends beyond the school day. As one nominator shared, "Mr. Marks is always positive, no matter the circumstances, he is always willing to help out others and provides numerous learning opportunities for our Little Longhorns every chance he gets, within school hours and outside."

According to another UTES teacher, Marks is "always going above and beyond to make our music program one of the best in the city!"



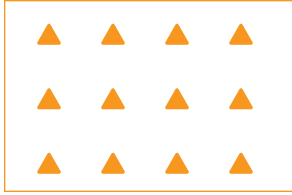
# Mid-Semester Start, Year-End Honor: Rookie of the Year John Cheek

UT Elementary's 2025 Rookie of the Year John Cheek, has had an immediate and lasting impact as a member of the Special Education team. Though he joined the team mid-semester, Cheek quickly became an integral part of the UT Elementary community by supporting students, collaborating with teachers, and creating inclusive co-teaching environments. His knowledge of special education practices and his willingness to jump in wherever needed have made him a trusted and valued colleague. As one nominator shared, "Started the year late, but jumped right in helping the Special Education (SPED) team, supporting teachers by creating co-teaching environments. And he is extremely knowledgeable in ALL things SPED."

Cheek's presence on campus feels anything but new. His enthusiasm, professionalism and commitment to student success reflect the very spirit of UT Elementary. Another colleague said, "From spreading cheer with music in the morning, to helping our Little Longhorns learn, to supporting the SPED team, Mr. Cheek does it all. His enthusiasm is unmatched."



# Staff Member of the Year Judy Morgan Honored for Exceptional Dedication to Students



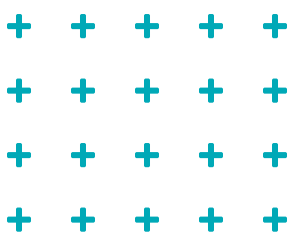
As UT Elementary's 2025 Staff Member of the Year, Judy Morgan is a shining example of dedication, compassion and excellence in education. As a Special Education instructional aide, Morgan brings unwavering commitment and a tireless work ethic to everything she does. Her impact is felt across campus — by students, staff and families alike. "Judy is the perfect candidate for Staff Member of the Year because of her unwavering dedication, exceptional work ethic and the positive energy she brings to our school community," one nominator wrote.

Morgan consistently goes above and beyond her responsibilities, always putting students first and ensuring they feel supported, valued and encouraged. Her kindness, enthusiasm and willingness to help in any way possible uplift everyone around her. A nominator noted her impact reaches far beyond her job description, "making her not just an outstanding staff member but also a true inspiration to everyone at our school."

## Six UTES Teachers Rank Among Top 5% for Knowledge and Skills

First passed by the Texas Legislature in June 2019, the Texas Education Agency Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA) elevates the education profession by providing districts with systems and funding to recruit promising new teachers, retain their best teachers and incentivize teachers to work in high-needs schools and difficult-to-staff positions. Through TIA, UT Elementary has six Master teachers, the highest ranking that places each of our Master teachers in the 95th percentile. The UTES Master teachers are: Thelma Herrera, Nicole Hershey, Carly Kennedy, Kameron Koeffler, A.J. Marks and Norma Robinson. Four teachers are ranked Exemplary and one as recognized. Superintendent Dr. Nicole Whetstone says, "Our teachers have been so excited about the TIA from the beginning. It allows us to recognize and reward effective teachers with the compensation they deserve."





# UT University Charter School

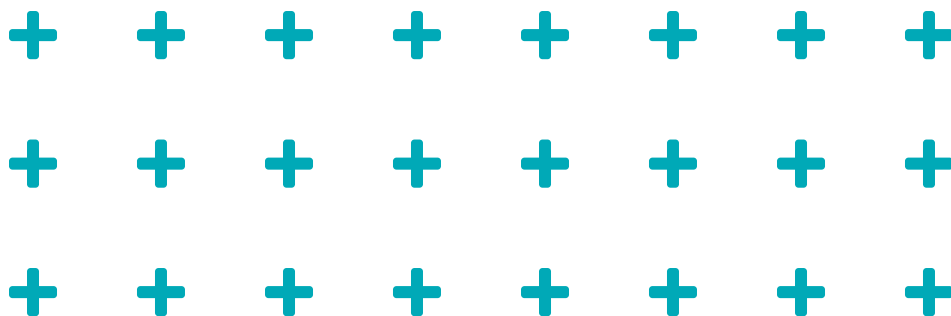
“UT Charter School has demonstrated measurable progress across key performance areas, including academic achievement, student engagement and the growth of community partnerships. Our 23 schools have embraced innovation, broadened access to resources, and cultivated inclusive environments where every student can thrive.”

**Nicole Whetstone, Ph.D.**  
SUPERINTENDENT



“At UT Charter School, we serve students who have unique needs, talents and gifts. Every decision we make, every lesson we adapt and every moment we invest in our students becomes a thread in the fabric of their future. We don’t just prepare students to enter the world, but we honor their strengths, nurture their potential and empower them to lead.”

**Autumn Leal-Shopp, Ed.D.**  
ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT

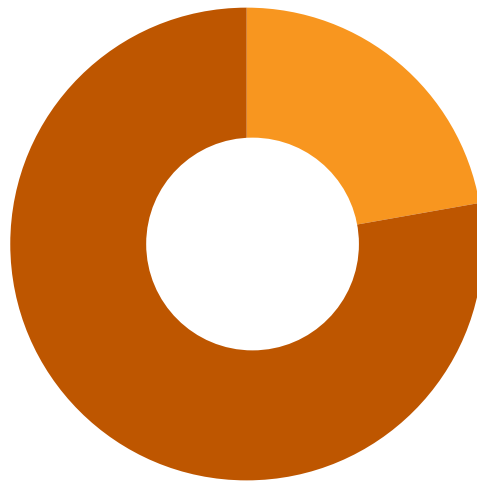
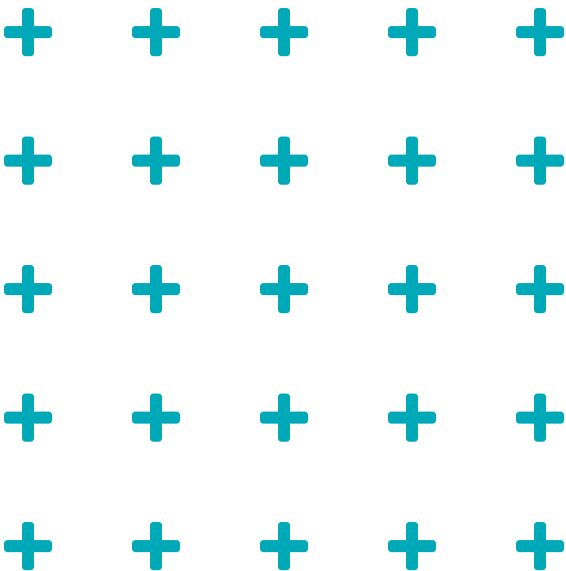


## 2024-2025 UTUCS STUDENT DATA

Demographics	Percentage
Hispanic	38%
American Indian/Alaskan	1%
Asian	1%
African American	15%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	<1%
White	42%
Two or more	5%

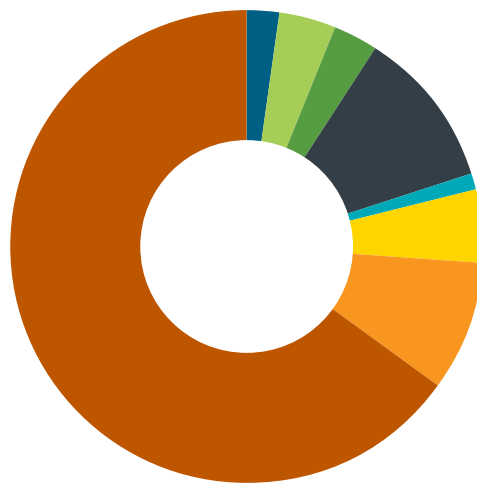
**Total Student Count** 1938

**Total high school graduates** 50



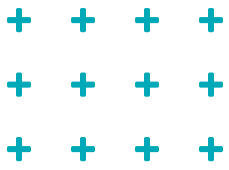
### Revenue

- 78% State Funding
- 22% Federal Funding



### Expenses

- 65% Instruction and Instructional Resources
- 9% School Leadership and Professional Development
- 5% Guidance, Counseling and Evaluation Services
- 1% Health Services
- 11% General Administration
- 3% Maintenance and Operation
- 4% Data Processing Services
- 2% Development



# Building Trust Before Teaching: How UT Charter School Uses Trauma-Informed Education



When a new student walks into a UT University Charter School classroom, something remarkable happens: They often don't need instructions. The daily rhythm is so embedded in the routine that newcomers simply follow other students, seamlessly joining a predictable flow that helps traumatized children feel safe, perhaps for the first time in their educational journey.

"I don't even have to tell new students what we're doing," explains one teacher. "They just walk in and observe. The other students are so conditioned to our rhythm and routines that new kids can just fall in."

This isn't an accident. It's the result of intensive training in trauma-informed learning that goes far beyond what most schools provide.

## WHEN TRUST BECOMES THE FOUNDATION

"Kids don't learn when they don't feel safe," says Andrea Menchaca, social work coordinator for UT Charter School. "It's just a basic function of being human."

Since 2023, Menchaca has been leading a transformation that recognizes a harsh reality: traditional teaching methods often fail students who have experienced abuse, neglect, and instability. At UT Charter School, many students are involved in the child welfare system and live in out-of-home placements. While every classroom typically has a few students who've experienced trauma, UT Charter School's percentage is significantly higher than traditional schools.

The school has embraced Dr. Bruce Perry's Neuro-Sequential Model of Education (NME)<sup>™</sup>, which outlines how trauma impacts development, learning, and behavior. A core concept, the Six R's (Relational, Relevant, Repetitive, Rewarding, Rhythmic and Respectful) provides strategies that support trauma-informed classrooms.

Classroom rhythm, for example, creates predictability for students who have experienced unsafe and unpredictable environments. "We can't just tell a student something one time," Menchaca explains. "Trauma impacts memory, concentration, and cognition. For these students, we need repetition, repetition, repetition."

While Texas requires trauma and grief training for all teachers, most districts satisfy this with a single session. UT Charter School chose a different path. Since August 2023, teachers have completed over 25 hours of trauma-informed training, far exceeding state requirements.

## REAL RESULTS IN THE CLASSROOM

Rebecca Vore, an educator with more than 20 years of experience at Georgetown Behavioral Health Center (GBH), focuses on learning each student's unique story. She works with students to identify their education goals. Some want to catch up, others worry about

maintaining all A's and some just want to learn how to relate to other students.

"Ultimately, we want all students to make academic progress," she says. "We also want students to be comfortable because they cannot access education — they can't get anything in their brains, can't remember, can't process what we teach unless they feel safe."

Her results speak volumes. One eighth grader breezed through eighth-grade math and then algebra during her stay. Another student, a high school senior, became the first in his family to attend college after earning a wrestling scholarship.

Vore's classroom follows a definite rhythm: morning walks, breakfast, mid-morning stretches and snacks, closing with group activities where students talk, read and connect. She has two rules: Everyone must be respectful and everything must be approached with an open heart.

## BENEFITS FOR EVERYONE

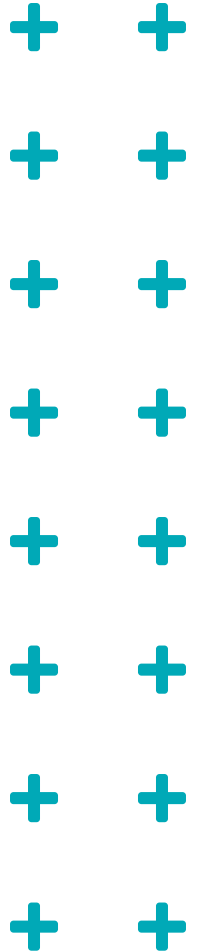
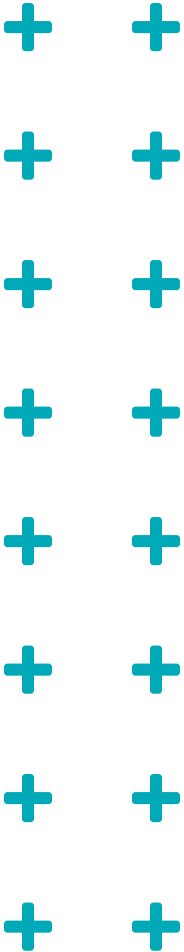
While designed for students who have experienced adversity, these approaches benefit every student. "We all benefit from predictability, rhythm, routine, connection and relationship," Menchaca adds. "But trauma survivors absolutely need these things to be successful, not just academically, but socially, emotionally and behaviorally."

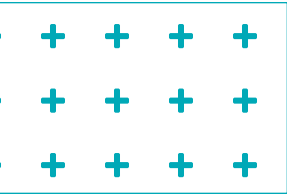
For UT Charter School, success isn't measured solely in test scores. Sometimes success means a student leaves with their first positive perception of school, a foundation that could change their entire educational trajectory.

"That's enough," Menchaca says, "because their experiences have been so negative."

In classrooms where rhythm replaces chaos and predictability replaces fear, UT Charter School students finally receive what all children deserve: the chance to learn, grow and trust their teachers.

"When we say we are here to keep them safe and help them to be successful, they can trust that we mean it," says Menchaca.





# UT Charter School's Online Program Opens Doors for Students Who Learn Differently

When Dr. Veronica Ruiz-Winner walks into her office each morning, she carries a profound understanding of what it means to follow a different educational path. As executive principal of UT Charter School's online high school program, she leads an innovative initiative helping students complete their high school journey.



"I dropped out in 10th grade," Ruiz-Winner shares. Her path from GED to PhD at The University of Texas at Austin proves that success doesn't always follow traditional routes.

That understanding helps shape UT Charter's online program, which launched as a pilot last year and has already graduated 10 students. During the pilot year, over 80 students completed 214.5 credits. What began as an initiative for students transitioning out of UTUCS partner care facilities has evolved into a lifeline for any student who needs education delivered differently.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF PERSONAL CONNECTION

The program operates on the Edgenuity™ platform, but what sets it apart isn't the technology, it's the human element. Each student is assigned a success coach who becomes their advocate, guide and consistent point of contact.

Ashley Johnson, dropout recovery coordinator and success coach, has been with UTUCS since 2010. She interfaces with parents and students to ensure they're enrolled in the right classes and staying on track.

"When things get tough and they're stressed out, or the parent is stressed out, not understanding how to navigate the education side of things, I'm there to help them and just kind of hold their hand through it," Johnson says.



This personal attention has proven crucial. Johnson recalls two students close to graduating but ready to abandon their education last spring. Both were turning 18 and didn't realize they could continue after completing intensive in-patient programs. Although they didn't graduate in spring, they should finish by December.



"Our program is giving them that second chance whenever they thought all hope was lost," Johnson explains. "It's really easy to feel isolated when you're just logging into your computer. Our students really need that extra support."



## ACADEMIC EXCELLENCE AND FLEXIBILITY

Academic rigor remains uncompromised. Students follow customizable degree plans meeting Texas Foundation High School requirements.

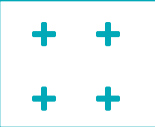


The program's success lies in its refusal to embrace deficit thinking. "We don't know the situations of these kids," Ruiz-Winner emphasizes. "So we always keep positive intent and ask, 'How can we help you?'"



As the program prepares for its second full year, Ruiz-Winner remains focused on the mission: ensuring every learner can find their path to success.

# UTUCS Intern Jonathan Frausto Perales Sharpens Teaching Skills at Pathfinders



"Let's be detectives," Jonathan Frausto Perales tells his student, transforming a challenging reading lesson into an engaging game. "Your job is to find the clues. Find those keywords that get to the author's purpose."



The strategy works. The teenager, who struggled with traditional teaching methods, suddenly becomes animated, hunting for textual evidence and connecting the author's purpose to inform, persuade and entertain to everyday life. "Can you give me an example of persuasion? Can you persuade me to buy this?" Jonathan asks, making the lesson applicable.

## FINDING CONNECTIONS WITH EACH STUDENT

As an intern at the UT University Charter School's Pathfinders campus, Frausto Perales works with at-risk boys ages 11 to 17 who live at the residential facility. While many educators shy away from middle school's transitional challenges, he embraces them.

Frausto Perales' approach starts with establishing relationships to find learning strategies that work. He learns every student's name and discovers their interests, whether it's Hot Wheels collections or Lego projects. "Making those small connections has a meaningful impact," he says. "It's so much easier for students to pay attention because they want to learn from someone they trust."

"Students are still learning who they want to be and who their role models can be," he explains. "Teachers can really make a big impact during that phase. I like to believe in all my students — it doesn't matter if they're labeled as troublemakers."



## LEARNING FROM MENTORS, INSPIRING STUDENTS

Frausto Perales's mentor, math and science master teacher Cammie Ockman (shown above with Frausto Perales), has been an educator for over 30 years. "Jonathan has brought a lot of patience, excitement and curiosity to the classroom," she says.

She explains his discussions about college resonate with high school students. "I think they like to see the process of becoming a teacher, and I encourage him to talk about how he is a first-generation college student in his family."

At Pathfinders, students stay an average of seven months. Principal Kris Ann Schmidt hopes to host more interns like Jonathan, who is the program's first pre-service teacher placement. She says, "Jonathan has worked very hard to make sure the boys are successful in the classroom."

Frausto Perales grew up in Austin and attended IDEA charter schools, graduating from IDEA Montopolis. "Attending UT has always been a dream of mine because they have people from all over the world. You can make a lot of connections and meet incredible people."

"I've made great connections with my College of Education professors," he reflects. "I've been fortunate to meet passionate teachers who inspired me to want the role I am now in."



# UTUCS and Laurel Ridge Celebrate 20 Years of Student Success

For two decades, the partnership between Laurel Ridge Treatment Center and UT Charter Schools has been making a difference for students facing behavioral health challenges.

Principal Maricela De La Cruz, Ph.D., oversees educational programming for 40 to 42 students in grades 6 to 12 participating in residential treatment at Laurel Ridge. With five teachers, one instructional aide, and a registrar on-site, the school operates as an integral part of the treatment process.

The partnership thrives through constant communication between educational and therapeutic staff. Key facility leaders, including Chief Clinical Officer Collin Krejci and CEO Ashley Sacriste, have been instrumental in maintaining this collaboration.

“The facility leadership team always keeps us in the loop,” De La Cruz explains. “They keep education as a priority.”

## INDIVIDUAL PATHS TO SUCCESS

Each student receives an individualized schedule after thorough review of their academic history. De La Cruz and registrar Edie Todd scrutinize student records, often calling previous schools to identify learning gaps.

“Students think, ‘This is just another place. It’s not a real school,’” De La Cruz says. “We try to get that out of their mind. We want them to know they can use their time wisely here.”

This approach paid off for one recent graduate who had been with the program since eighth grade. Despite numerous setbacks, he graduated last December and fulfilled his dream of joining the military.

“I think all of us felt a sense of pride that he made it,” De La Cruz reflects.

## TRAUMA-INFORMED FOUNDATION

Student successes stem from implementation of the Neurosequential Model in Education (NME)<sup>™</sup>. “Until the kid feels safe and secure, they’re not going to be able to learn, so that’s our starting point,” De La Cruz says.

This commitment has contributed to exceptional staff stability, with most employees working at the school over five years, enhancing the partnership that is a testament to what’s possible when educators and treatment providers work together, transforming outcomes for students who need it most.



*Principal Maricela De La Cruz (far left) and Assistant Superintendent Autumn Leal-Shopp (far right) join Laurel Ridge CEO Ashley Sacriste in a special ceremony marking her graduation with a doctoral degree.*

# Kris Ann Schmidt Named Semi-Finalist for 2025 H-E-B Excellence in Education Award



UTUCS is proud to announce Executive Principal Kris Ann Schmidt (shown above second from right) has been selected as a semi-finalist in the 2025 H-E-B Excellence in Education competition.

Superintendent Nicole Whetstone says “Kris Ann exemplifies the H-E-B award to honor educators who go the extra mile every single day to serve their students and communities. We know she doesn’t have a typical day since she serves three dramatically different campuses, each with radically different needs.”

Schmidt’s largest campus, Texas NeuroRehab Center (TNC), serves students from across the U.S. with brain injuries and complex medical challenges. Pathfinders Camp focuses on young men who have experienced significant trauma, many from foster care. Olympia Hills caters to students pursuing competitive gymnastics.

“Teachers who work with students at TNC and Pathfinders are doing incredibly difficult work,” Schmidt explains. Recognizing that educators working with traumatized children face increased risk of secondary trauma, she prioritizes teacher wellness alongside student success.

Schmidt continuously monitors data and students’ Individualized Education Plans (IEPs), overseeing a team approach to tracking student progress through data sharing with families, facility directors and teachers using both digital platforms and individual conferences.

“Most of our kids do really well because our teachers modify their teaching and accommodate their learning needs,” Schmidt notes, crediting her three teams’ specialized training and dedication for creating positive outcomes.

## Teacher of the Year Taylor Hunt Brings Art and Heart to Settlement Home



Taylor Hunt, UT Charter School's 2025 Teacher of the Year, exemplifies dedicated, student-centered education. Based at Settlement Home campus, she teaches middle school English Language Arts and Reading, high school English I–IV, and Art I & II with passion and creativity.

A former instructional aide at the campus, Hunt has spent

four years as a teacher, continually expanding her skills. Before the 2023–24 school year, she earned an art certification and collaborated with educators across Austin and Houston to bring a high-quality art program to her students. She integrates art into her English lessons to inspire creativity and engagement while fostering a safe, welcoming classroom environment.

"Mrs. Hunt displays a positive attitude every day," one nominator wrote. "She smiles, greets everyone, and she genuinely cares about the well-being of her students and colleagues."

## Rookie of the Year Katherine Rowe Honored for Exceptional Impact at Basepoint Academy

At UT Charter Schools, Rookie of the Year honors an educator who is new to the district and has made an extraordinary impact in a short time. This year we celebrate Katherine Rowe from Basepoint Academy in Forney.

Rowe has brought both expertise and enthusiasm to her work. Her peers describe her as someone who "goes above and beyond for her students," ensuring they have the tools and support to succeed, not just academically, but in their unique learning environments.

From writing excellent PLAAFPs (Present Levels of Academic Achievement and Functional Performance) to analyzing student learning and advocating for their needs, Rowe exemplifies

## Data Diva Michelle Shepherd Named Staff of the Year

Michelle Shepherd, UT Charter School's 2025 Staff of the Year, is the backbone of the district's data operations and a trusted leader across 24 campuses. As the PEIMS coordinator, she oversees all student data and manages campus clerks statewide, ensuring the district consistently meets state compliance requirements. Her exceptional dedication, attention to detail and commitment to service have made a profound impact on district success and efficiency.



Shepherd is known for her reliability, problem-solving skills and supportive leadership. "She's always available to answer questions, solve problems, and just be a great sounding board," one nominator shared. Her collaborative approach and deep knowledge of state-mandated data processes make her an invaluable resource to staff across Texas.

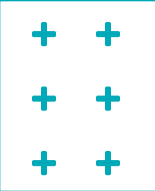


the UTUCS philosophy of students first. She has built strong relationships with partner facility staff, collaborates seamlessly with instructional aides and consistently communicates with parents about student needs and strengths.

Her colleagues say it best: "She is AHMAZING!"



# Administrator of the Year Maricela De La Cruz: A Role Model for Compassion and Excellence



UT Charter Schools is honored to recognize Maricela De La Cruz, executive principal for San Antonio area campuses, as the 2025 School Administrator of the Year. She has served as a UTUCS administrator for eight years, overseeing Laurel Ridge Treatment Center, Boysville, High Point, Pathways and SJRC during the 2024-2025 school year.

De La Cruz champions both student academic achievement and emotional well-being. Her leadership ensures students in crisis are met with compassion and necessary structure. Because students attending her schools have often moved between different settings, she ensures each has a plan that maximizes their time on campus.

Her impact extends to staff retention. For example, teachers at Laurel Ridge have remained at least five years. This year marked a major milestone when seven of her teachers received state recognition through the Teacher Incentive Allotment program.

Superintendent Dr. Nicole Whetstone notes, “Dr. De La Cruz leads with compassion, vision and an unwavering pursuit of excellence. Her extraordinary work ethic and steadfast advocacy for students who continually have been underestimated serve as a model for educators everywhere.”

# UTUCS Teachers Strive for Excellence through TEA Texas Incentive Allotment

awardees include seven Master teachers, 13 Exemplary teachers and eight Recognized teachers. Passed by the Texas Legislature in June 2019, the TIA elevates the education profession by providing districts with systems and funding to recruit promising new teachers, retain their best teachers and incentivize teachers to work in high-needs schools and difficult-to-staff positions.

At UT University Charter School campuses across Texas, 28 of our 71 teachers have been recognized as standouts through the Texas Education Agency’s Texas Incentive Allotment (TIA) program. The TIA

Superintendent Nicole Whetstone explains, “The TIA is helping us retain exceptional educators and recruit talented teachers, ensuring our most at-risk students have access to outstanding instruction. It recognizes the talent and knowledge our teachers bring to the classroom every day.”





# UT High School

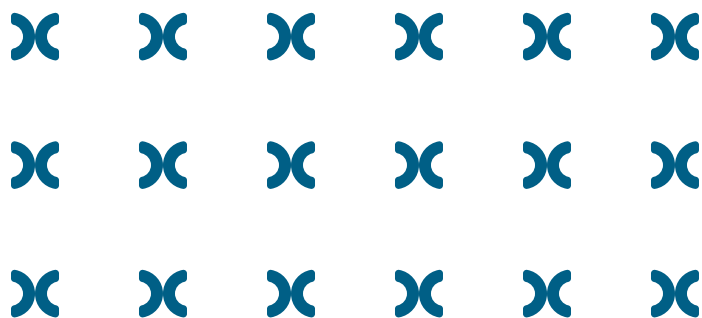
“With the support of The University of Texas at Austin College of Education, UTHS is uniquely propelled by its talent, mission, and reach to drive substantial positive change for Texas and the wider world.”

**Michael Caudill, Ph.D.**  
SUPERINTENDENT, UT HIGH SCHOOL  
SPECIAL PURPOSE DISTRICT



“The uniqueness of our students is what drives us to innovate and lead in online education. Our students remind us daily that education is not one-size-fits-all. Their diversity of goals and talents is what makes UTHS extraordinary.”

**Barry Bacom, M.Ed.**  
ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT



## 2024-2025 UTHS STUDENT DATA Texas Diploma Program

<b>Students in Texas Diploma Program</b>	<b>1,667</b>
<b>Total high school graduates</b>	<b>317</b>



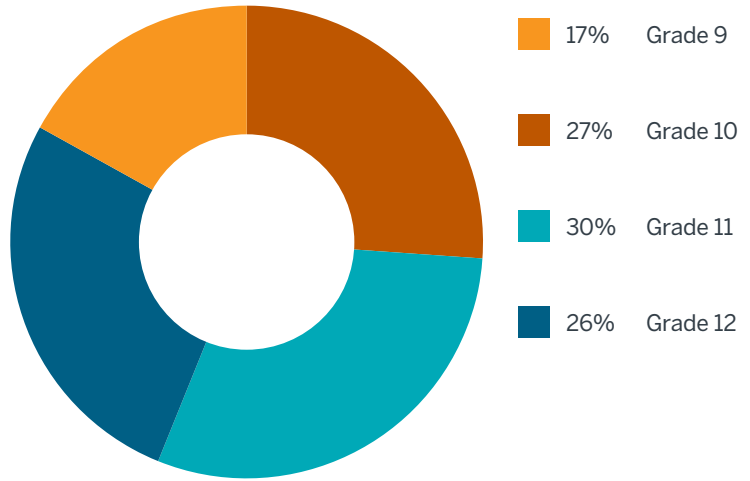
Ethnicity	Percentage
Hispanic/Latino	33%
American Indian/Alaska	<1%
Asian	6%
Black/African American	7%
Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	<1%
White	48%
Two or More Race	6%



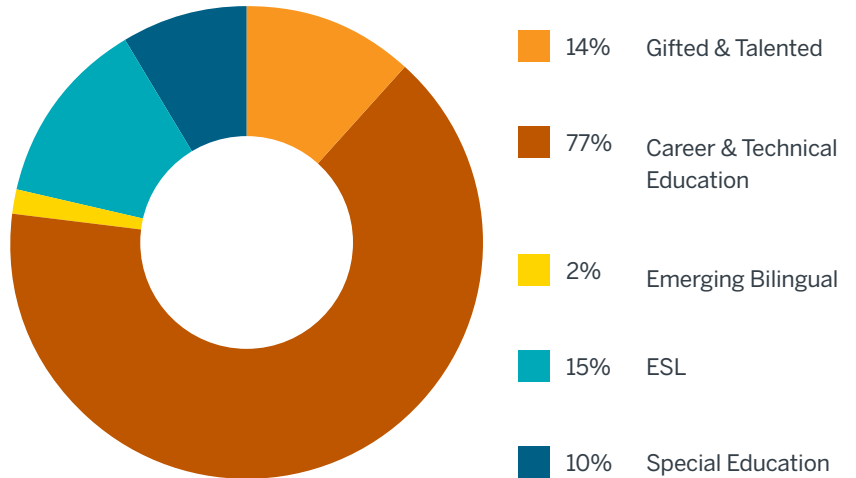
<b>Students in International Diploma Program</b>	<b>121</b>
<b>Graduates in International Diploma Program</b>	<b>34</b>
<b>Number of Independent Courses Sold in 2024-2025</b>	<b>24,734</b>
<b>Number of Credit by Exams (CBEs) Sold in 2024-2025</b>	<b>37,280</b>



**Students by Grade Level**



**Students by Program**



# Charting the Course

## How UT High School Built a Strategic Plan Through Authentic Engagement



The past two years have brought significant change to UT High School — a new superintendent, a new assistant superintendent and integration into The University of Texas College of Education PK-12 Schools unit under Executive Director Melissa Chavez. With so much happening, Chavez knew they needed more than incremental adjustments. They needed a bold, future-focused strategic plan.

“Developing a five-year strategic plan was essential because we needed a clear roadmap for growth, innovation and student success,” says Chavez. “It helps ensure every decision is intentional, aligned with our mission and responsive to evolving needs.”

What emerged over five months in 2025 wasn’t just a planning document, but a master class in inclusive leadership that reshaped how the school approaches its mission.

### **BUILDING TRUST THROUGH TRANSPARENCY**

The foundation for successful strategic planning had been laid months earlier. Assistant Superintendent Barry Bacom says the UTHS leadership team spent the previous year building “a reputation for listening.”

“We had already established that we would come back to staff meetings and say, ‘Hey, last time you told us this, so we’re changing something,’” Bacom explains. This trust became crucial when strategic planning began in earnest.



## A DIFFERENT KIND OF PLANNING PROCESS

The strategic planning team was carefully constructed to represent diverse voices within UTHS. The Education Council joined with the District Leadership Team and board members, spanning divisions and including educators, parents and outside perspectives through surveys.

Leading the process was Cathy Doggett, CEO of Paradigm Shift, whose facilitation emphasized connection. “Each session began and ended with a return to our relationships and our shared ‘why,’” says Illeana Mendez, director of testing services.

Four sessions between March and July 2025 used interactive tools and collaborative activities. What made the process unique was how it extended beyond core meetings.

After each session, Bacom recruited two participants to help bring the work to broader staff. “It was important that it wasn’t just me saying, ‘Here’s what the strategic planning team did,’” he notes. “So it would be a teacher and a learning specialist — people who aren’t in formal leadership positions — describing what we did.”

These presentations became part of regular all-staff meetings, with feedback forms creating a continuous loop back to the strategic planning team.

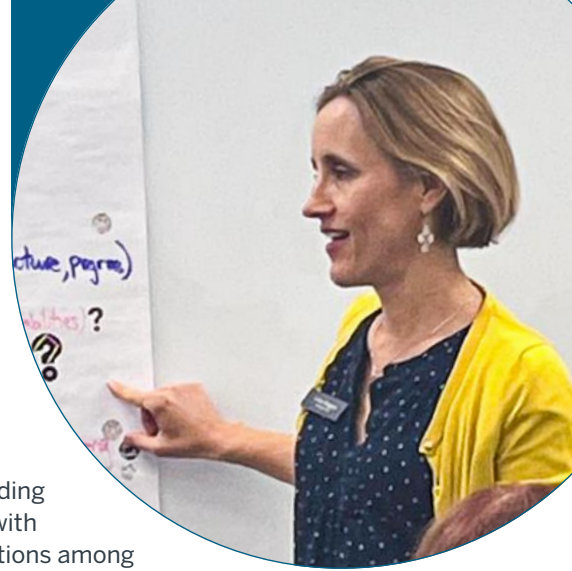
## FROM INPUT TO IMPACT

The inclusive approach paid dividends in both plan quality and staff buy-in. Additional feedback came through surveys to students, staff and families, plus discussions during staff meetings and student council.

“I was incredibly impressed by the team,” Doggett reflected. “Everyone came with energy and real presence. You could tell everyone authentically cared.”

The process resulted in a reimagined mission and vision, with strategic goals organized around three pillars:

- Connected Community - Building inclusive culture with authentic connections among students, educators, families and communities
- Instructional Excellence & Curriculum Innovation - Creating interactive, relevant instruction that prepares future-ready students
- Global Impact & Statewide District Support - Developing responsive resources that set the global standard for dynamic, flexible support



## IMPLEMENTATION AND LOOKING FORWARD

UTHS built implementation into existing systems, creating their annual district improvement plan with every goal “intentionally linked to one of the pillars,” according to Bacom.

They transformed regular communications too. The monthly “Program Spotlight” became “Pillars,” with each month highlighting a different strategic pillar and showcasing departmental contributions.

“We’re trying to keep it front of mind all the time,” Bacom explained.

What made UTHS’s process successful wasn’t just great facilitation, it was fundamental commitment to authentic engagement. As Doggett emphasized, successful strategic planning “starts with a process where everyone feels heard and has a hand in creating the plan.”

As UTHS implements their 2025-2030 strategic plan, they’re doing so with genuine excitement and ownership from their community, something many organizations lack.

Says Chavez, “I am so proud of the UTHS team. They have created more than a roadmap. They have strengthened the culture that will help them achieve their vision of Opening Doors to Education for a Changing World, and they are already implementing each pillar.”





# From One-Bus District to Global Classrooms: Q&A with Superintendent Michael Caudill



On June 1, Michael K. Caudill, Ph.D. officially became superintendent of The University of Texas High School Special District. With three decades of experience as a math teacher, principal, assistant superintendent and superintendent, he brings a wealth of perspective, a passion for helping students find their own path and a great sense of humor to his new role. We sat down with Caudill to hear more about his background, leadership philosophy and what's ahead for UTHS.

## **Q: Did you always know you wanted to be an educator?**

Caudill: Not at all! As a kid I thought about business or law. But I always worked with kids — babysitting, in the church nursery, as a camp counselor — and I played a lot of team sports. It just felt natural. My parents were first-generation college graduates and big on education, so I grew up with high expectations around school. And along the way, I had some incredible teachers who really inspired me.

## **Q: What have been some of the most formative jobs in your career?**

Caudill: Becoming superintendent at Bluff Dale ISD in my early 30s was huge. It was a tiny district of about 100 students, Pre-K through 8th. I had to do everything: principal, superintendent, cafeteria director, transportation manager, even testing the water supply. The district had one bus — I bought another so we could attend athletic events, essentially doubling the fleet. I became a Certified Business Official. People don't realize that little districts must do the same things that big districts do, they just don't have the staff.

Another highlight was helping start the Westlake High School Alternative Learning Center in Eanes ISD back in the 1990s. I was doing an administrative internship while working on my first Master's degree. That program is still running today, and I'm proud to have been part of something that gave kids a different way to succeed.

**Q: How would you describe your leadership style?**

Caudill: I call it “situational leadership.” With new staff, I’m more directive. With experienced teachers and administrators, I collaborate or step back, depending on what’s needed. The key is to match the leadership approach to the person and the situation.

**Q: You’ve been an advocate for alternative learning for a long time, both at Eanes and as assistant superintendent at Smithville running the Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) program. What draws you to it?**

Caudill: Every student’s journey is different. Some thrive in AP or dual-credit classes. Others need the flexibility of online learning. I’ve always believed schools should create multiple pathways so that kids can find what works for them. That’s what excites me about UTHS — we have the tools to personalize education at scale.

**Q: What are your priorities for UT High School this year?**

Caudill: Growth, support, participation and personalization. We’re adding new full-time teaching staff, strengthening services for students and families and launching a social work program that will provide more comprehensive support. At the same time, we’re working on ways to build a sense of community and school pride in an online setting.

**Q: What about the longer-term vision?**

Caudill: We’ve put together a five-year strategic plan that focuses on three things: Instructional Excellence & Curriculum Innovation, Community Connections, and Global Impact & District Support. These have helped us focus on expanding enrollment, including middle school, keeping our services strong and responsive to the diverse needs of online learners and continuing to develop world-class curriculum.

The challenge and the opportunity is building connection in an online environment. We don’t pass students in hallways every day, so we have to be intentional about creating those connections.

**Q: What excites you most about leading UT High School?**

Caudill: The combination of talent, mission, and reach. UTHS has an incredible staff and the support of The University of Texas. We’re in a position to make a real difference not just in Texas, but globally.

We have students from across Texas and across the globe. Some have special challenges that need to be met, others have a lot of anxiety and we have a large group of high achievers who are college bound. Every student deserves a pathway that works for them, and that’s what we’re building. What starts here, changes the world!





# A Crowning Achievement for Emma Fossum, Miss Texas' Teen



At age 13, Emma Fossum logged on to her first class at the University of Texas High School. By then she had been a competitive figure skater and musician. Already she was charting a course that would lead her from online learning to the Miss Texas' Teen crown, and more importantly, reaching thousands of children through music.

After being homeschooled since fourth grade, Emma and her family recognized that her increasingly busy schedule, balancing music, travel and pageantry, demanded flexibility that traditional schools couldn't provide.

"I needed a school that allowed me to pursue my passions without sacrificing academic excellence," explain Emma.

UTHS's virtual environment proved essential to Emma's growth. Her favorite course, AP Government, ignited a passion for understanding how policy affects everyday lives, strengthening her public speaking and critical thinking skills that were invaluable in her pageantry and advocacy work.

As the oldest of five siblings and having strong friendships, outgoing Emma didn't miss the social aspects of traditional school. The online environment didn't prevent her from forming meaningful relationships with teachers and counselors, including principal Darnell Horton and counselor Melissa Brooks. "UTHS may be virtual, but the relationships I've built there have been very real and meaningful," she says.

## COMMUNITY SERVICE FOR MILES

Emma's interest in pageants began as a personal challenge to become a stronger speaker and leader while sharing her love for music and community service. The discipline from years of figure skating and piano — grace under pressure, connecting with an audience, and emotional expression — helped prepare her for competition. But what makes Emma's story compelling is what she's done with the community service portion of her platform.

Inspired by her sister Ellie's journey and the power of music, Emma launched Miles for Music, a nonprofit dedicated to fostering creative self-expression through music and storytelling for kids who feel unheard or different.

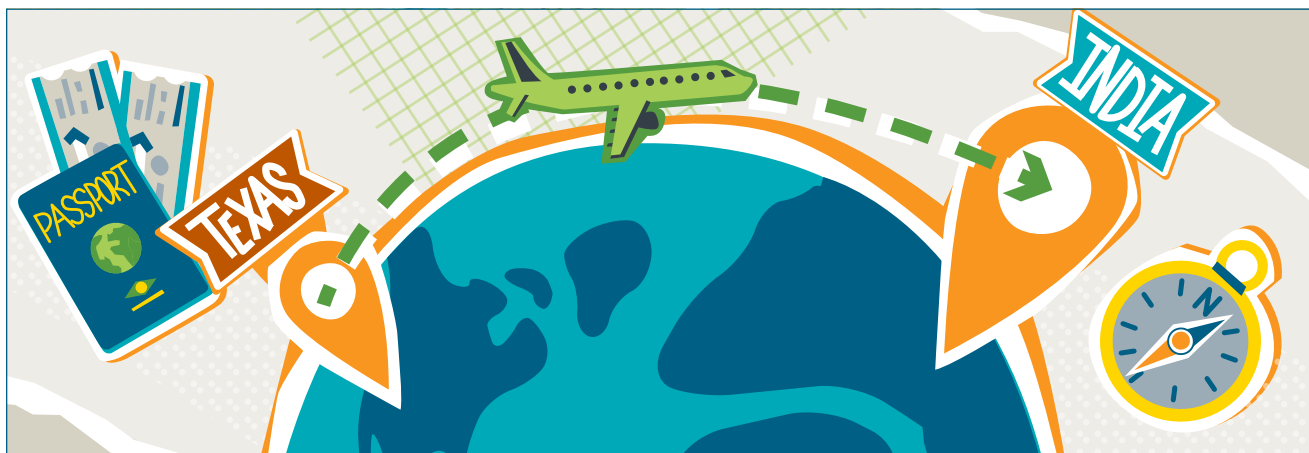
"Ellie was nonverbal until the age of five," explains Emma. "Growing up with her taught me that expression isn't limited to words. Sometimes a melody can say more than a sentence ever could."

Over the past year, Emma has partnered with local philanthropist Maestro Bruno to donate 13 digital pianos to underserved schools. She's performed her presentation over 200 times, reaching more than 13,700 students across Texas and becoming an official volunteer partner with Dallas ISD.

## THE NEXT CHAPTER

In fall 2026, Emma will attend the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, majoring in Business on the pre-dental track with dreams of becoming an oral surgeon. As she prepares to trade her crown for university studies, one thing is certain: Emma will continue to strike the right note between ambition and service.

# From Texas to India: How Four Siblings Graduated at Age 15



When the Solomon quadruplets moved from Prosper, Texas, to Chennai, India, in 2021, they could have seen it as a setback to their education. Instead, Rebekah, Joel, Nina, and Meira turned it into an opportunity to accelerate their academic journey.

Now 17 and thriving in online universities across the United States, the four siblings share a remarkable distinction: They all graduated from UT High School's International Diploma Program at only 15 years old in December 2023, completing their high school education in just over two years.

When the family relocated, the young American citizens faced a choice: adapt to an unfamiliar Indian curriculum or find another path. "We're used to the American curriculum," explained Nina. "We stuck with what was familiar."

## THE ACCELERATION ADVANTAGE

UT High School's self-paced learning became their superpower. While traditional classrooms move at predetermined pace, the Solomons could delve into subjects when ready.

"The best thing about online high school was when you're given your course, everything is available," said Rebekah, the eldest by minutes. "Once you unlock a module, you can keep working through it."

"Some days I would just be like, you know, I can complete this material. I don't need to wait," Nina explained. "That's how we slowly started pacing ourselves to finish early."

The quadruplets found their greatest advantage in each other. Rather than missing classroom discussions, they engaged in lively debates among themselves.

"They were motivating each other, striving to move forward," observed their mother, Elizabeth Solomon. "The environment really got everybody riled up. Like, yes, we can do this!"

Despite being thousands of miles from their teachers, the siblings found robust support. The 10.5-hour time difference worked in their favor. "We would email teachers in the evenings our time," Nina said. "Because it was morning in Austin, the teachers would respond promptly."

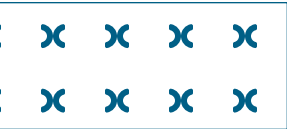
## COLLEGE SUCCESS

All four started college at 16 and are excelling:

- Rebekah studies English at Fisher College in Boston, made the Dean's list, and is pursuing her dream of becoming a published author.
- Aspiring to become a defense attorney, Joel studies political science at Indiana University, made the Dean's list and honor society.
- Nina thrives at Indiana University in political science, made the Chancellor's list, and aims to become a criminal attorney.
- Meira studies economics at Arizona State University and is considering business law or management.

"The courses at UTHS are very rigorous," Joel notes. "I am glad to have been prepared for Indiana University in advance."

"I don't regret anything about choosing UT High School," Meira reflects. "It was really, really good."



# Educator of the Year Nikki Northcutt Champions Students and Innovation



Nikki Northcutt brings infectious passion to everything she does—from crafting curriculum to launching UTHS Student Council, a program that’s quickly become central to student engagement.

“Nikki is always focused on doing what’s best for students,” one colleague said. “She has poured so much time and energy into Student Council, and she does it all for the good of students.”

Beyond teaching, Northcutt created the instructor onboarding course and serves as a supportive thought partner for her colleagues. “She’s supportive all around, willing to step up and talk at leadership meetings on behalf of the team,” a coworker noted.

Northcutt expressed gratitude for the recognition. “I’m honored to be selected by my amazing peers,” she said. “This school gave me the chance to continue working with high school students, something I thought I’d lost after leaving traditional public education. I’m excited to help innovate and offer students high-quality curriculum in an adaptive environment.”

# Staff of the Year Kim Penridge Solves Problems Before They Start

As executive assistant to the superintendent, Kim Penridge is the heart of UT High School — and colleagues agree she’s invaluable.

“Kim goes above and beyond her formal duties daily, taking initiative, solving problems before they escalate and always offering support with a team-first mindset,” one nominator wrote. Another added, “Her ability to build strong, trusting relationships with everyone in our community is unmatched.”

Penridge supports operations across departments at UTHS, which serves thousands of students worldwide and oversees statewide programs including credit-by-exam, AP testing and teacher professional development. From planning events to ensuring smooth daily operations, no job is too big or too small.

“UTHS is full of dedicated people who work tirelessly to support students and staff,” Penridge said. “I am truly honored and humbled to have received this award.”



# From P-TECH to Policy: Administrator of the Year Dustin Payne Moves UTHS Forward



Associate Principal Dustin Payne is a results-oriented leader who turns vision into reality.

He spearheaded the school's Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) program, allowing students to earn a high school diploma and associate degree simultaneously. He also developed the district's first Student Code of Conduct and serves on the Board of Directors for the Texas Association of Secondary School Principals.

"His commitment to innovation is clear through the systems and practices he has helped shape this year...making our school stronger, more responsive and more connected," one colleague wrote. Another added, "He consistently identifies areas of need and collaborates on novel solutions."

"I'm incredibly honored to receive this inaugural award," Payne said. "This recognition reflects the collective effort of everyone at UTHS working together to make a difference every day."

## Rookie of the Year Emily Vaculik Redefines Science Curriculum

Emily Vaculik hit the ground running in her first year as a science learning specialist and never looked back.

With more than a decade of teaching experience and a master's in curriculum and instruction, Vaculik quickly became essential. She took on Environmental Science curriculum writing, taught Physics (despite initial uncertainty), and developed Biology End-of-Course professional development for teachers across Texas.

"Emily hit the ground running in science," one colleague wrote. "She did it all with a great attitude and has gone out of her way to create AP prep resources for students."

Vaculik expressed gratitude for the honor. "The collaborative spirit here is unmatched. Everyone is willing to jump in and support both staff and students," she said. "I'm very thankful to be part of this team."





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