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Texas Group Makes News With Data

By Bess Keller

Austin, Texas

Principal Barry P. Horst was familiar only in passing with the group Just for the Kids when it gave his DeLeon, Texas, elementary school a lowly one-star rating—the educational equivalent of a motel with scratchy sheets and thin towels.

"Initially, there was disbelief," Mr. Horst said, and then, "a lot of concern."

Though DeLeon Elementary School fared better on recent state accountability ratings, it couldn't turn its back on the dismal mark from the nonprofit group, which doled out its lowest score possible in the course of rating nearly 5,400 public schools for *Texas Monthly*, a respected magazine read statewide.

The concern spurred Mr. Horst and seven other people from the 700-student DeLeon district southwest of Fort Worth to travel six hours round-trip to a workshop run by the folks who had caused the trouble.

Having heard two former principals tell school turnaround stories at the session held here in Austin this month, Mr. Horst now wants to find more time to build students' skills. And he's wondering if money might be available for a longer school day or year.

This is the kind of story that Just for the Kids hopes to repeat as it takes its recipe for school success nationwide—a move it announced last month—in an effort to help states do a better job collecting and using their vast collections of school data.

Mr. Horst summed up his lesson this way: "It's easy to get wrapped up with things going on at your own school and get comfortable with it. But if [higher achievement] is being done around the state, it can be done here."

In many ways, Just for the Kids is enjoying a banner year.

The widely read collaboration with *Texas Monthly* raised Just for the Kids' profile—its first workshop after the piece drew nearly 100 educators, or three times the average attendance.

And now, the group is poised to become a player nationally.

Founded by the influential Texas lawyer Tom Luce six years ago to help local communities improve schools, the group recently joined with the Denver-based Education Commission of the States and the University of Texas at Austin to form the National Center for Educational Accountability.

The center aims to bring Just for the Kids' school performance analysis to any state that wants it. Seven have already signed up. ("**Group to Take Texas Reform Tools Nationwide**," Nov. 14, 2001.)

Partially because of the new center, the organization's staff has more than doubled over the past six months, from six to 14 people. Its annual budget has about tripled in the past three years, to \$1.9 million, and the

group has moved from an office in downtown Austin to more spacious University of Texas research quarters.

Two former school administrators hired to detail the practices that make schools a success on the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, or TAAS, expect to spell them out for middle schools, adding to the ones that are available for elementary schools. Plans to expand the group's Texas data to include high schools are on track for next month.

Equally important, the group's message is being heard by the public as never before.

A Just for the Kids analysis of 40 urban districts in Texas, requested by the *Austin American-Statesman* newspaper, recently landed smack in the middle of the Austin mayoral race. Gus Garcia, who was elected this month, cited the published study to decry most of the state capital's high schools.

Earlier this year, Just for the Kids calculated Texas dropout rates for *The Dallas Morning News*, helping the newspaper weigh in on that controversial topic. The Dallas paper also commended the group's Web site to parents and others in an editorial. But the *Texas Monthly* collaboration stands out, in part because the magazine reaches a sophisticated statewide audience.

"I think this was their coming-out party," said S.C. Gwynn, who wrote the story accompanying the ratings. "There are zillions of schools out there that had never heard of these guys."

Today, Mr. Gwynn explained, Texas schools live or die on their state education department ratings. But Just for the Kids, he said, aims to get people thinking in terms of a higher standard than the one set by the state—one that is more in line with giving students a solid grounding for college. That shift "is just starting to happen," Mr. Gwynn suggested. "We'll see how deeply it percolates into the state."

Genius of the System

By its own count, Just for the Kids has worked with educators from some 2,100 of the state's more than 7,000 schools. Many more have doubtless visited the group's interactive Web site that went up in 1998. Still, it is hard to say how much schools have improved because of the group. The results of a recent survey of a sample of elementary schools, asking about the group's influence, are due out next month.

Whatever the impact, Just for the Kids' formula rests on appealing logic.

Mr. Luce, the founder, reasoned that a statistical picture of school progress that was widely shared with the public would give community leaders, parents, and educators a common way of measuring school performance—and a common language for talking about it.

In turn, advocates for school improvement could pinpoint the most successful schools, investigate them, and spread the word about what they had done right.

To be sure, the Texas accountability system already provides something along those lines. It publicly rates schools according to how their students did, and also breaks out the passing rates of various groups, such as Hispanics, blacks, and poor children.

But Mr. Luce believed that more could be done with the data.

He argued that one improvement would be for Just for the Kids to set its sights beyond the state benchmarks. Rather than look to the proportion of students passing the state tests, schools could be characterized by the proportion of students that achieved the higher marks needed for "proficient." Such a

mark is more consistent with the level of achievement students will need to prepare for and succeed in college, research shows.

Second—and this may be the genius of the system, its supporters say—the statistical picture should compare schools with student enrollments that are at least equally challenging to educate. Not only is it fairer to consider the proportions of students who are poor and have limited English skills, but proponents say that approach also takes away the excuse that one school does better than another because of its more advantaged students.

In the Just for the Kids comparisons, which can be found on the group's Web site, test results for a particular school appear along with the best scores from economically and linguistically comparable schools. To give a more complete picture, another analysis shows results over a seven-year period, and others note which students have been at a school for three full years.

Motivational Tools

The comparisons "give power to the [districts] who want to do their very best, and motivate those who do not want to change very much," said Brad Duggan, a former head of the state elementary principals' association, and the executive director of Just for the Kids since its founding.

Deborah Wells, an assistant superintendent for the 4,500- student Kerrville schools southwest of Austin, agrees that the Just for the Kids data can have a powerful effect on expectations.

"We always hoped and always strived for all kids to learn," she said, "but when we saw that a district like Aldine or Pharr-San Juan-Alamo does so well with 90-something percent of economically disadvantaged students, and we have about 50 percent, we knew we could, too."

Ms. Wells telephoned administrators at some of the successful districts to get ideas. Those conversations led her to the intersection of principal, teacher, and assessment as a place where significant improvement could be leveraged.

She learned that while her teachers gave frequent tests—a hallmark of successful schools, according to Just for the Kids—they generally worked alone to fix the gaps in student skills the tests revealed.

Following the model provided by one district, Ms. Wells encouraged principals to be aware of the teachers' struggles and make sure students get the extra help they need.

"I sit in on all the grade-level meetings the teachers have," said Ted Schwarz, the principal of 400-pupil Chester W. Nimitz Elementary School. "I've interceded, I've monitored, and everyone finally hears every problem or plus of every kid in the school."

At the same time, Kerrville educators work with a retired principal and TAAS expert, Margaret Kilgo, on matching classroom activities to escalating test demands and to the district curriculum. That meant detailing the skills and concepts that must be learned, in what order, and in what grade.

Ms. Kilgo's approach dovetails so well with Just for the Kids' message that the independent consultant and the group now coordinate their efforts.

Mr. Schwarz credits Ms. Kilgo with helping his school reach Just for the Kids' high-performing group within the last three years. Her strategy included coaching teachers to drop even favorite activities—such as the 1st grade unit on American Indians—that don't fit with the district's curriculum.

"I've seen the teachers on this campus change so much," Mr. Schwarz said.

Now, Just for the Kids educators visit Kerrville to get ideas for other districts.

And while the educators at Just for the Kids like to think that their school performance data provide tools for their colleagues in the field, they realize it can have another role.

If the tool is occasionally a hammer, so be it, says Mr. Duggan. "There has to be tension in the system for there to be change."

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