

Alternative Education: At the school, it's academic

Milburn Academy focused on graduation

By Jon Mark Beilue

This bridge to a better life is almost hidden on 51st Avenue, just a stone's throw from a Pizza Hut on Western Street. This nondescript building, a former office building that shows its age, stands directly across from Texas Nursing and Rehab. Ironically, Maverick Street intersects with 51st.

A passer-by along the street could easily drive by and not notice the small sign - "Richard Milburn Academy." And underneath in smaller lettering, "Texas Public High School."

There is a nearby small billboard next to the one for Splash water park. It mentions free tuition, small classes, and half-day sessions. But that's it for advertising.

There's no cafeteria, no athletic teams, no mascot, no band, no choir, no organizations, no extracurricular activities and no real fanfare. Just a second chance, and for most of the 220 students enrolled, a final chance to graduate from high school and to make something positive out of their lives.

"A lot of these kids would be literally on the streets looking for a job - not homeless - but they would be the kids trying to find a job without a high school diploma," said Becky Pinson, director of the little-known academy. "They'd either be lost in the system and totally frustrated or in the job market as a dropout."



Michael Schumacher / Amarillo Globe-News

Janae Ask, right, enjoys a big laugh while Luis Bernal, center, wraps her in duct tape to make a custom mannequin in fashion class at Richard Milburn Academy. Kelsea Hoffman, left, stands ready to assist.

The Richard Milburn Academy in Amarillo is one of eight such academies in metropolitan areas of Texas. The school, which draws at-risk students from Potter and Randall counties, is the third-largest of its kind in the state. It's an alternative campus and a public charter high school. Through the Texas Education Agency, the academy can offer an alternative method of instruction. The alternative means the academy offers instruction for a half-day, either morning or afternoon. It's based on four semesters a year as students seek to graduate from an accredited high school.

Who attends Richard Milburn Academy? Those likely to free fall through the cracks. Those who could not fit into a traditional high school, who

About Richard Milburn Academy

Where are the RMA's in Texas?

Amarillo, Beaumont, Corpus Christi, Fort Worth, Houston, Killeen, Lubbock, Midland and Odessa.

How is the academy funded?

Primarily through state and federal grants. The school gets Average Daily Attendance money through the state, and Title I funding through the federal government. It is not a tax-based institution.

How are students enrolled?

Students fill out an application, and by state law, they have to be accepted unless there are legal issues. There also is an interview process to determine their academic status. Students are often referred to by counselors at other schools or through word of mouth.

were at-risk for dropping out, those who had family support problems or their own social issues. There were 32 girls at the academy who gave birth last year. After their babies were born, instructors came to the home to keep them up to speed on their classes and keep them focused on graduating.

“I was at Tascosa and didn’t like it. I heard about this place. I saw how much the teachers care,” said Melissa Mason, 17, a senior. “I’m accepted here, and it’s worked out pretty well.”



Jesus Robbles, from left, instructor Don Collins and Salvador Santos in the computer applications class.

Mason goes to school from 7:50 a.m. to 2 p.m. She takes classes like credit recovery and business computers, but also traditional classes like world geography, world history, and English IV. She goes to her job at a restaurant at 3 p.m. and works until closing time.

“The kids here are cool,” she said. “We’re all here for one reason - to graduate. Other schools seem to focus on the class as a whole, but here they focus on you. They make sure you know the material before moving on.”

Brent Womble retired from the Amarillo police department last April after 34½ years on the force. He initially did some substitute teaching at the academy in May. Now he’s the academy’s police liaison officer through the Randall County sheriff’s office

reserves. He also teaches a class on criminal investigation.

“I tell people I really feel the good Lord just dropped me in here,” Womble said. “It’s a rich mission field. Becky and I talk several times that I hope March 28, 2010, was the day some kid will say, ‘Wow, that’s when my life turned around.’”

Most students who begin at the school are damaged in some way, mostly psychologically.

“A lot of these kids have been beat down,” Pinson said. “They’ve been told they’re worthless and not going to make it. We try to build up that character and self-confidence. Let them know we care and when they get that message it turns around their school performance.”

The academy opened in 2001. Currently there are 23 on staff, 18 of them state-certified teachers. The student-teacher ratio is 13 to 1.

“I would put our quality of instruction up against any school in Amarillo,” said Pinson, who was a counselor for four years before becoming director

this year. “At one time, there might have been a reputation as a blow-off school, but that’s not true. We hold their feet to the fire. We have high expectations, and we don’t tolerate non-compliance.”

The first year in 2001 there were four graduates. Last year, 70 graduated at the Civic Center auditorium. The valedictorian receives the same top graduating scholarship as any other valedictorian in the city. For some, they are the first to graduate high school in their family.

“I’ll probably start crying talking about this,” Pinson said, “but we look at this as a ministry. We effect changes in kids’ lives.”

For more information about Richard Milburn Academy, please visit our website.

MilburnSchools.org/RMA

