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EDUCATION

230 girls get Ann Richards' wish come true

When new all-girls leadership school opens in Austin Aug. 27 it will be only second such public school in Texas

By [Janet Wilson](#)

AMERICAN-STATESMAN STAFF

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Laura and Monica Herrera won the lottery.

The sisters tore open letters in March and sparkling confetti flew out. Instantly, they knew they would be two of only 230 girls walking through the doors of Austin's first all-girls public school.

They hollered, cheered and jumped up and down in the front hall of their far South Austin home. They dashed to the phone to call grandparents and aunts and uncles with the good news: After surviving a rigorous application process, they had been chosen in a random drawing, putting them into the inaugural class of the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders when it opens Aug. 27.

"We feel blessed," says Thelma Herrera, mother of the sixth- and seventh-graders. "Their dad (Steve) and I told them their hard work in school has given them this opportunity."

Laura and Monica, who were students at Mathews Elementary School, not only are living their family's dream, but fulfilling those of former Texas Gov. Ann Richards, a champion of education and women's rights who died last year after a short battle with esophageal cancer. Richards' daughter, Ellen Richards, heads the Ann Richards school's advisory board and says this will be her mother's true legacy.

"After she died, we were going through her papers and found a list titled 'How I Want to Spend My Time,' " Ellen says. "One item was 'Leave the world a better place for having been here.' Obviously she did that a million times over, given how much effect one person can have. But I think (the fact) that her name is going to continue to carry this school forward, and that she will continue to be an inspiration, is a perfect legacy."

The Ann Richards academy is taking over the former Porter Middle School near South Lamar and Ben White boulevards. It is the second all-girls public school in Texas.

The Irma Lerma Rangel Young Women's Leadership School in Dallas, named for the first Hispanic woman elected to the Texas Legislature, opened in 2004. Both schools are part of a small but growing trend in same-sex education.

In 1995, only three public schools in the United States offered single-gender educational opportunities, according to the National Association for Single Sex Public Education. This fall, more than 300 public schools will have some form of gender-separate education. Though most of the schools will have both boys and girls separated into same-sex classrooms, more than 70 will be entirely single-gender schools.

Recent changes to Title IX, the federal law that made discrimination by gender illegal in schools that receive federal money, opened the door for more same-sex schools. The Austin Independent School District is exploring community interest and support for an all-boys school.

Jeanne Goka, principal of the Ann Richards school, traveled around the district last year talking to girls who this fall would be entering sixth and seventh grades. She told the girls about how the new school would help them prepare for college, emphasize math and science, teach them to be leaders and help them maintain a healthy lifestyle.

Interest was high. Applications from 675 girls were received for the 230 coveted slots.

Laura, 12, and Monica, who turns 11 Tuesday, couldn't wait to tell their mom, who works as a bilingual pre-kindergarten teacher at Mathews Elementary, about the new school Goka described. Their dad, general manager at Burks Reprographics, heard about it when he got home, too.

The Herrera sisters started working on their applications. They had to display some academic achievement, but also a desire to attend college. They had to submit last fall's semester grades, attendance records, two current teacher recommendations and write a letter to Goka explaining why they wanted to opt out of the coed classroom. Their applications were scored, based on a formula, and qualifying names were put into the drawing.

Writing the essay was hard for Monica, who told of her plans to become an architect. "I went through five drafts before I got to the final one."

Goka wanted to know who their heroes were. The Herrera sisters didn't have to look far from home. Their great-grandmother, Hortencia Ybarra, has only a second-grade education but was determined her children would have better opportunities. She told her husband, Manuel, that she didn't want them to be migrant workers. She wanted their children to be able to stay in the same school and go to college.

In 1954, Manuel Ybarra got a job with the state highway department. Their eight children graduated from high school; seven graduated from college and three earned masters degrees.

"She always had books in the home and read the encyclopedia from A to Z," Thelma Herrera says of her grandmother, who lives in South Texas. Hortencia Ybarra also taught herself to read and write in English and Spanish. "She yearned for knowledge. If it weren't for her, who knows."

'They have a voice'

Supporters of girls-only schools say girls do better in the classroom without boys, especially in math, science, technology and other subjects usually dominated by male students. The girls are less distracted, able to focus on their studies and participate more in class discussions when boys aren't in the equation.

"We live in a sexist society that sends messages that rockets are for boys and poetry and art for girls," says Leonard Sax, executive director of the National Association for Single Sex Public Education.

"Go to a local university and ask a professor if he can tell which girls went to a coed school and which went to an all-girls school and they can tell the first day," Sax says. "Girls from coed schools raise their hands and wait to be called on. And if they aren't called on, they won't speak. Girls from all-girls schools raise their hands and if they aren't called on, they interrupt. They have a voice."

Sax points to women such as Sally Ride, astronaut and first American woman to fly in space; Condoleezza Rice, first woman to serve as national security adviser; Bernadine Healy, cardiologist and first woman to head the National Institutes of Health; and Madeleine Albright, first female secretary of state. All are products of all-girls schools, he says, and all had the confidence to aim high in professions dominated by men.

"It's very nice to say we should change the culture and make it less sexist, but meanwhile you have a child growing up (in that environment)," Sax says.

Not all educators and civil rights advocates favor academically separating boys and girls. Some fear same-sex schools could reverse 30 years of gains in gender equality.

Sandra Spencer, director of women's studies at the University of North Texas in Denton, is among those with reservations. She warns there is not a lot of comprehensive research on gender-specific schools. She worries that Title IX will be weakened and that the system might lack accountability.

"I know of Ann Richards' dedication to women and her strong sense that women need leadership skills they are not getting in public education. I strongly support that," Spencer says. "But I'm concerned especially with the notion that it seems now this is a cure-all for education. I don't think we have any cure-all for education."

Others worry about how girls, who do not have to compete with boys in school, will compete with them in the future workplace.

Sax disagrees, saying studies show most girls in coed schools base their self-esteem on whether they are pretty, and not whether they make good grades, have good relationships with their parents or are good at sports or other activities.

"In the real world, who you are counts for more than anything else," Sax adds. "Unless you are a model or actress, it doesn't matter if you are a size 2 and have nice skin and look like Halle Berry or Julia Roberts. If you show up late for work, don't return calls and don't get your work done, you get fired."

Inspiration from East Harlem

Dallas philanthropists Lee Posey, founder of Palm Harbor Homes, and his wife, Sally, are enthusiastic supporters of same-gender schools and were instrumental in creating the Irma Rangel school. The Poseys, who already were helping disadvantaged girls on an individual basis, traveled to New York in 2002 to tour the Young Women's Leadership School of East Harlem. In that highly successful public school, girls not only score high on standardized tests, but graduate from high school and have a high acceptance rate at colleges and universities across the country.

(Ann Richards, on her own, also had visited the Harlem school, talked to the girls, and was similarly impressed.)

The Poseys wanted to duplicate the Harlem model back home. They formed a nonprofit foundation, now called the Foundation for the Education of Young Women, with a mission to create six all-girls, college-preparatory public schools in Texas by 2012.

They started in Dallas, talking to school district officials who bought into the concept. Like other public schools, Irma Rangel is supported with tax dollars. But it also benefits from a private partnership with the Poseys' foundation. The foundation works with the Dallas school on a yearly basis to raise money for extras ranging from teacher training to foreign exchange programs for the girls.

Tax dollars will also pay for the Ann Richards school facilities, teachers and equipment. In addition, the Poseys' foundation is donating \$1 million during the school's first four years and the Ann Richards School Advisory Board will raise funds for an endowment. The extra money will pay for additional teacher training, academic field trips (to Girls State and Girls Nation, leadership training programs that a teenage Ann Richards attended), foreign exchange programs and other summer activities that expose the girls to career and leadership opportunities. Also to be offered is a college-bound program, including a full-time counselor to guide the girls and their families on the road to college — everything from SAT prep to college visits, to applying for financial aid and scholarships.

Think public school with all the bells and whistles of a private school.

'Willing to take a risk'

During its first two years, the Irma Rangel school made the Poseys proud: It received high marks from the Texas Education Agency based on its TAKS scores and dropout rates. This month, the Irma Rangel school received an "exemplary" rating for its 2006-07 school year, the highest the Texas Education Agency gives. Only 637 of more than 8,000 schools received the highest rating.

Principal Vivian Taylor is not surprised at the ratings for her school, which this fall will have 400 students and 34 teachers in grades 6-11. She looks for applicants who are "academically focused and who understand the importance of education" and says she believes her girls would do well academically whether at Irma Rangel or in a coed setting.

"However, I do know and have seen evidence in our third school year that girls are more apt to raise their hands and respond in math and science classes," Taylor says. "Girls are willing to take a risk, give an answer and not be afraid of giving the wrong answer."

Irma Rangel student Stephanie Aguilera has always been a straight-A pupil, but she wasn't as outgoing, or as willing to take risks, as she is now. The 16-year-old recently returned from a 10-day, school-sponsored trip to Italy, where she, seven classmates and two teachers lived with a local family, attended school and toured the country.

"It did change me because now I know that I can overcome large obstacles such as culture and language barriers," Aguilera says. "I feel as if small challenges will no longer bother me because of the bigger challenges we overcame."

Recently elected junior class president, she is excited about returning to school and starting fundraising projects to help support the class.

"It is our junior year, which can be very stressful," she says, "but I know we can get through it together."

Taylor easily smiles when talking about her "young ladies." She knows there are critics of single-gender education. But she fervently believes it's a choice that not only parents of children in private schools should have, but public school parents, too.

'Everybody could be a star'

The student essays for entry in the Ann Richards school had to be written by hand. Not only does it level the playing field for girls without access to computers, but Goka says handwritten letters are "more likely to be authentic student work instead of someone else's."

Goka read them all: One girl wanted to cure her brother's sickle cell anemia; one described her mother, who was a professional in Mexico but here could get a job only as a waitress; and another girl didn't want to get pregnant like all her sisters — she wanted to be the first to go to college.

Goka's heart broke as she read the letters because she knew most of the applicants wouldn't win the drawing for a spot at the school. The admissions process was so fair that even Ann Richards' granddaughter was treated like all other applicants. Though a highly qualified candidate, 11-year-old Maeve Richards' name was not drawn, and so she is unable to attend this year.

"It's heartbreaking to turn them away because these girls already took the first step to say, 'I want to do something, I want to go to college,' says Goka, who taught at Austin's private St. Michael's Academy and was director of the Austin district's Kealing magnet

school before being hired as the Ann Richards school principal. "All applicants had the courage and determination and desire to do something more, to leave their home base and friends and the convenience of a neighborhood school. I have a great deal of respect for all these applicants."

This fall there will be 115 girls in sixth grade and 115 in seventh grade. One grade level will be added each year until 2012, when the school will have 805 students in grades six through 12.

The student body is ethnically diverse: 54 percent of the girls are Hispanic, 24 percent Anglo and 16 percent African American. Students from economically disadvantaged families were given priority — 75 percent of the student body was chosen from Title 1 schools, which have free and reduced lunch programs.

Crucial to its success will be fundraising and donations from the business community, which so far has embraced the school. Public Strategies, where Richards was working when she died, developed the school's logo and is helping with promotional materials. Primus Networks is hosting the school's Web site for free.

Marnie Greenwood, of Marnie Rocks, a Houston jewelry design company, donated gym clothes, with shirts reading "Girls Rock" on the front and the school's logo on the back. (All the students will wear school uniforms — basically white shirts, black pants and plaid pleated skirts.)

Architect Emily Little, of Clayton Levy Little, collaborated with the Austin school district on renovation of the former Porter campus. Austin Architectural Graphics is providing the school's signs and discounted its services, which freed up money for additional campus improvements. Architects Robert Smith and Heather McKinney and landscape architect Sarah Lake have donated professional design services.

"Mother believed in the importance of spending time in nature, and efforts are being made to improve the exterior landscape (including a courtyard off the north side of the school) so that the girls will have a nice place to be outside," Ellen Richards says. The school's entrance will feature large photos of Ann Richards in action, including one photo of her releasing an eagle in West Texas.

Richards knew all about the school before she died. Austin school officials had asked her to champion the all-girls school before she was diagnosed with cancer. So she was intimately involved in its planning and was working on it when she died Sept. 13, 2006. She hand-picked the advisory committee and made sure there was a family member on board, Ellen Richards, to carry out her wishes.

Goka said the one detail the former governor of the Lone Star State wanted was a star in the school's logo. She got it. The "A" in Ann Richards is the top of a prominent star that adorns the school's name. "That was her mantra ... that everybody could be a star," Goka says.

The school is almost ready to open. There's only one thing missing: Richards had wanted to stand at the front door to greet each student on their first day of school.

She didn't make it. But she knew she was creating a multitude of stars.

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Tim Sharp for AMERICAN-STATESMAN

[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Stephanie Aguilera, left, with teacher Kimberly Clark Ferguson, attends the Irma Lerma Rangel Young Women's Leadership School in Dallas. Aguilera says the school has helped her face challenges.



Tim Sharp photos for AMERICAN-STATESMAN

[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Vivian Taylor, principal of the Dallas all-girls school, says she looks for applicants 'who understand the importance of an education.'



Mark Matson FOR AMERICAN-STATESMAN

[\(enlarge photo\)](#)

Laura Herrera, left, 12, and her sister, Monica, 10, will attend the Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders. Behind them are parents Thelma and Steve Herrera.

Ann Richards School for Young Women Leaders

Address: 2206 Prather Lane

Students: 230

Teachers:19

Principal: Jeanne Goka

Grades: 6 and 7

Projected enrollment when first class graduates in 2013: 805 for grades 6-12

Core curriculum: Pre-Advanced Placement (PreAP) curriculum in English, mathematics, science and social studies

Extracurriculars: Athletics, band, orchestra, choir, art, National Jr. Honor Society, student council, Richards Ambassadors, Big Sisters and after-school clubs including organic gardening, ecology, drama, Math Counts, journalism and yearbook

Mascot and colors: STARS, blue and black

Application Web site: annrichardsschool.org. Applications for 2008-09 will be available in November; deadline in early February.