

## All-Girl College Prep Turning Heads in San Antonio, Producing Tomorrow's Leaders

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By [Bekah McNeel](#)

This first things I notice on my visit to the Young Women's Leadership Academy (YWLA) are the sounds.

Hushed discussion over a math problem. Scribbling pencils in notebooks. Clear, articulate statements, and a healthy dose of good-natured giggling when the situation calls for it. The sounds of purpose.

When class is in session, student eyes are glued to the teacher at the front of the class, looking away only long enough to scribble notes in their journals. Between classes they talk respectfully to their peers, move efficiently into lines, homework in hand, outside their next classroom. A smiling teacher stands at the door, greets each student and collects homework. No slumping in the back of the room, hoping she doesn't notice. No lingering at lockers casting dirty looks. Only young women on a mission.

"We don't use a tardy bell," boasts Delia McLerran, the energetic and beaming principal of YWLA. "We don't need it."

YWLA has been on the Texas Education Agency's list of Exemplary Schools since they opened in 2008. It's not hard to see why. Aside from racking up honors at University Interscholastic League competitions, decathlons, history fairs, and science fairs, these young women are building the kind of resumes that will make them competitive in any college admissions office. They begin high school taking AP classes, and by their junior and senior year are well into dual credit courses and a senior seminar.

The college preparatory experience begins on day one. As an internal charter within SAISD, YWLA



Students working hard at YWLA.

requires an application process. A written portion is followed by an interview. The girls do not need to test on grade level to be one of the 100 sixth graders admitted each year, but they do need to meet certain aptitude requirements.

Parents or guardians are interviewed as well, to ensure that they understand and support what will be asked of their daughter.

“This is not a school for everyone,” admits McLerran, “It is very rigorous, and [parents] have to think, ‘will my daughter be willing to attend school on Saturdays?’”



Principal McLerran in the auditorium.

School on Saturday has been a proven ingredient to boosting academic performance in public college prep schools like YWLA and KIPP. At YWLA, with girls coming from across Bexar county, even as far away as Poteet, that’s no small order. Many of the girls use public transportation to get to the Monticello Park campus, which means very early mornings.

The students are also encouraged to take ownership of extracurricular activities. Photography, documentary, and interior design clubs have been initiated by students. To fund those equipment-intensive clubs, teachers walk the girls through the grant application process. If there’s one job skill in hot demand, it’s grant writing.

Clearly the students who attend YWLA already have several advantages. They are driven. They are bright. They have parents or guardians who care enough to help them go the extra (30) miles. In the schools they are leaving, many of the girls were accustomed to being at the top of their class.

McLerran remembers one girl in particular, who was painfully shy when she arrived. She cried her way through most of her first semester, leaving her teachers and McLerran at a loss for how to help her. Finally, through another bout of tears, the sixth-grader confided in McLerran.

“I’m not the smartest kid in my class anymore!” she sobbed. (I’m reminded of how I felt in graduate school realizing that I was “average” among my peers.)

McLerran comforted her with a challenge. “You are being challenged. That’s good. But why don’t you say instead, ‘you’re not the smartest kid in your class *yet*.’”

Two years later, the sobbing sixth-grader is an outgoing, confident eighth-grader who stays late to work on science projects in the school’s pristine and well-stocked lab.



College Bound and loving it.

This, however, is not the sort of prep school environment that fosters cheating, cattiness, and Ritalin abuse. For every Ivy league banner hanging in the hall, a sign of character stands nearby.

#### YWLA Motto

Watch your thoughts...they become words.

Watch your words...they become actions.

Watch your actions...they become habits.

Watch your habits...they become your character.

Watch your character...it becomes your destiny.

The school's core values, in addition to college preparatory, are leadership development, health and wellness. Before each new batch of sixth-graders begins school, they have three weeks of summer school. One week for intensive academic preparation, one for leadership training, and

one for martial arts – a skill that encourages fitness, confidence, discipline, and also gives them a bonding experience.

“We emphasize the sisterhood,” McLerran said. “They are competitive but compassionate. Sisters don’t take or hurt. Sisters support.”

Teach for America Corps member Nina Slote testified to this, recounting her amazement as girls jumped at the opportunity to assist each other in class, without being asked. Listening in, she was struck by their genuine compassion and helpfulness. They weren’t just sharing answers.

Slote was curious about the all-girls environment before she arrived, but now she is sold on the value. The young women in her science class are far more assertive and confident than those she has observed student teaching in coed schools.

“They are willing and pushed to participate,” she said.



Nina Slote shapes scientific minds.

McLerran seconded this. In an all-girls school, the pressure of meeting cultural gender expectations is mitigated. The girls are encouraged to develop goals, not fit molds. Their teachers are confident that this will only serve them well.

When a student expressed lighthearted anxiety about being “awkward” around boys in college after not being around them in high school, Slote was quick to reassure her.

“Here you are learning to build close and supportive relationships. That’s what you should be looking for in any [meaningful] relationship,” Slote said.

The drive and determination these young women exhibit has made many of them neighborhood heroes. Often at the school’s white rose ceremony, when new students are formally inducted into their class, whole networks of friends, relatives, and neighbors will attend.

Not every girl has that support system. Many rely on their newfound sisterhood and the support of their teachers to resist cultural pressures to blow off school, college and their big dreams for the future.

Sonia Rodriguez, who sits on the board of YWLA is inspired by these girls. “I cannot leave the campus without being moved to tears,” she said.

In the face of some overwhelming challenges, Rodriguez has been impressed by what she sees in the YWLA community of as “a collective commitment that school comes first.”



A sunny day at the YWLA.

Parents making sacrifices. Teachers going above and beyond. Students taking their jobs seriously. And, of course, the visionary pioneers who made it possible in the first place.

In the hallway of YWLA hangs a portrait of Lee and Sally Posey, the visionary founders of the Foundation for the Education of Young Women. The Poseys were impressed with the results of the Young Women's Leadership Academy of East Harlem, and wanted to see those results replicated in Texas. Through public-private partnerships, they have seen six all-girls charter schools open across the state, including the one in San Antonio.

Local philanthropist Jimmie Ruth Evans and the Rodeo Foundation led the fundraising efforts for our YWLA. The SAISD school board acted on a moment of open mindedness under Dr. Duron, and made way for YWLA to take root in the city, a bold move that has paid off in the lives of the young women enrolled as well as their communities.

Sophomore Ilana Villagran admits that there have been times she has considered leaving YWLA and returning to her old school. In the end, however, her ambition shines through.

“I like how you know that every day you walk into class, they are going to push you,” she said. She knows she won’t get that everywhere. It was worth starting over in a new school, making new friends, and now she wouldn’t trade them for the world.

Villagran is having a hard time narrowing down her list of target schools. Maybe Middlebury. Maybe Stanford or Vanderbilt.

Tina Valdez has found her passion: math. She has her heart set on MIT or Rice, and she wants to be an engineer – a field where women are vastly underrepresented.

The girls talk about ambition, opportunity, and goal-setting in clear and articulate voices. I walked away from the academy feeling hopeful for the future of all girls.

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