



SMALL TOWN REAPS BIG REWARDS FOR PUBLIC CHARTER SCHOOL

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Once a month in the Town of Westlake's Council Chamber, councilmembers and staff are transformed. The town manager enters the chamber not as a municipal executive, but as a school superintendent. The mayor becomes president of the school board, councilmembers become school board trustees, and the town secretary switches to board secretary. The Town of Westlake, the only municipality in Texas to be awarded a public charter school, created a unique shared services model balancing a public charter school with municipal services. Every department, from human resources to communications to public works, has dual roles. Westlake's finance department even has two budget cycles.

The road to opening a public school was challenging and the unknowns were immense but the results have been astounding. Westlake Academy is nationally ranked and its students are graduating faster from college than the national average. The Academy's rigorous International Baccalaureate curriculum attracts families from across the nation. The school has a waiting list of more than 2,500 students vying for one of the 832 seats. In return, the success of the school is spilling over into the town with a surge of economic benefits as parents build or purchase high value homes in Westlake so their children can attend the Academy. Since the school opened in 2003, Westlake's population has grown from 303 residents to about 1,040.

How it all began

The idea started in early 1978 after Westlake's mayor at the time Scott Bradley, and his wife Kelly, walked their two daughters to the front gate on the first day of school and saw children from adjoining ranches waiting for the bus. Thoughts about a school came about after seeing buses from three districts picking up children.

"It was then that the thought hit, for Westlake to become a real community, there must be shared values," Scott Bradley said. "Westlake could never become a great community if its greatest resource—its children—were separated into three different districts. Westlake needed its own school."

But none of the districts would agree to build a school in Westlake, so the search began for an alternative that didn't require the other ISD's consent.

Challenges faced along the way

Legal research revealed a Texas law adopted in 1883 that allowed a municipality to form its own independent school district. The law had been used once in the state's history by the City of Stafford. In that case, the public education community opposed the creation of Stafford's new district all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

"The Supreme Court ruled for Stafford, so we felt sure we could establish our own school," Scott said.

But in 1985, just as Westlake prepared to file the legal paperwork, the Texas Legislature began its session. At the urging of the education lobby, the Legislature repealed the 1883 law, thus thwarting the attempt to start a Westlake school.

So, the Town Alderman waited.

About 10 years passed, and when the Texas Legislature amended the Education Code to allow for charter schools, work again began. Despite fierce opposition from neighboring school districts, the charter was filed and the Town succeeded in obtaining an open enrollment charter which opened in September 2003.

The rewards

Westlake Mayor Laura Wheat said building a charter school is a perfect fit for smaller towns and cities that are divided between school districts. "Other communities invest in pools, parks, and libraries. We have chosen to invest in Westlake Academy," Laura said.

The investment is paying off. Town growth has flourished with new housing developments including the latest—Granada, 84 single-family luxury homes that covers 84 acres. Also on the horizon for Westlake is the town's first mixed-use development, Entrada, planned to be modeled after an old-world Spanish village that will include various types of residential, retail and office uses, as well as restaurants and hotels.

"It's a huge economic development generator," Laura said. "When you have a nationally ranked school in your midst, your property values soar."

More about shared services

Many towns and city staff members wear multiple hats, but sharing services between a school and municipality can be a little tricky. The Town of Westlake organization has an education side and a municipal side but only one tax ID number, and each entity has a different retirement system. Town Manager/Westlake Academy Superintendent Tom Brymer said with school growth, the balance is even more challenging. "You have a growing school supported by a finite amount of municipal resources."

The finance department has two accounting systems, two coding systems, and staggered fiscal years. The Academy's budget is a component of the Town but is maintained as a separate budget and separate audit for the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Finance Director Debbie Piper said organiza-

tion is the key to success. "We prepare a detailed budget calendar with realistic deadlines and internal support so staff can submit documents in a timely manner."

Town Secretary Kelly Edwards said since both are local government entities, basic job duties are similar for minutes and agendas but the difference comes with open records. "While most municipal records are open and available to the public, academic records are protected by the Family Education Rights and Privacy Act."

More online content filtering is required by the IT department because of the academic side. "Tweaking that while trying to find the right mix so the municipal side can get to what they need is a challenge," explained IT Director Jason Power. A benefit is that with so many users at the school, it leverages the economies of scales in purchases.

The Human Resource Department deals with two sets of hiring requirements because of state mandated background checks for educational employees. "Also the academic side doesn't have staggered anniversary dates like municipal employees, so the intensity level at the beginning of the school year is massive," said HR Director Todd Wood. For building regulations, the Facilities Department adheres to two sets of regulations. For instance, in pest control the state mandated guidelines are stricter at the school. But a huge benefit is the ability to share vendors. "Using each other's contractors helps maintain quality and consistency," reported Director of Facilities and Parks and Recreation Troy Meyer.

For communications, even though staff writes to two very different audiences, sharing services between a municipality and school is a perfect partnership. "The school is a great unifier and helps establish a sense of place and belonging within a community," said Director of Communications and Community Affairs Ginger Awtry. "We love getting to know both our parents and our residents; many are one in the same."

Westlake Assistant Town Manager Amanda DeGan said strategic planning is challenging because accommodating the academic schedule during summer and winter breaks can cause gaps in planning, communication, and reporting. Policy preparation involves elements associated with Texas Education Agency guidance, versus legislative mandates from the state of Texas, applicable to both entities.

Despite the modifications, Amanda said being a public servant and supporting service delivery is gratifying and allows Town staff to connect with residents both at home for municipal services and through their children, as students at the Academy. "It's very rewarding to know you have made a difference on multiple fronts to those we serve," she added. ★