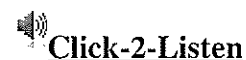


International High School is haven for students learning English

Students there outperform those with limited English proficiency at other Austin high schools.



By [Raven L. Hill](#)
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Like many of his classmates at the International High School, Hamed Berenji had struggled for weeks with saying goodbye to the familiar as he adjusted to his new homeland.

Now, it was time for the 16-year-old to teach them how to say hello. In Farsi.

"Salaam," he wrote on the bright blue poster.

One by one, the other students joined him in sharing their native greetings: Chao. Kushe. Mingala ba. Bonjour.

Different paths brought each of the International High's 194 students to Austin. Some arrived seeking greater opportunity under fairly typical circumstances — a mother's new job or a father's desire to study at the University of Texas — but others came under more harrowing conditions. Those students barely escaped war-torn countries with their lives.

For many immigrant students, International High School is a haven. Housed at Johnston High School in East Austin, the three-year-old, open-enrollment school is one tool the Austin school district is using to help students overcome the hurdles of learning a new language, a new culture and coursework.

On state standardized tests, the students generally outperform those with limited English proficiency at other Austin schools. District officials are preparing a report on the progress of International High students, who can remain in the program for two years, after they return to neighborhood schools.

International High students have unique motivations. Many come from countries where education isn't free or readily available. Some students had to work to support their families; others might

have had their education cut short by political unrest.

Judging by scores on the state achievement test, International High still hasn't solved the hardest part: teaching the students to master reading. And its two-year program risks shattering the students' fragile comfort zones by sending them to neighborhood schools that can make them feel like strangers in a strange land all over again.

"We have two years to make up for a lifetime," Principal Anabel Garza said. "Just when they're getting comfortable here, they leave."

Students with limited English proficiency make up about a quarter of Austin's total enrollment. Of the district's 20,452 high school students last year, 2,318 were English-language learners.

"If you're not very fluent and you don't have much education in your native language, then that is an additional challenge for you," said Martha Garcia, executive director of the district's bilingual education program. "The more fluent you are in your native language, the easier it is to learn English."

For most students, walking into International High is their first experience in a U.S. school. In hallways teeming with students, many said they had never felt more alone than on that first day of school, afraid of the language barrier and worried that teachers would think they were dumb because they couldn't speak English.

Janelis Peña , a 16-year-old from Cuba, said she was frightened.

"It was so difficult because I don't speak very good English," Peña said through a translator. "I didn't understand."

Most students have a 9- or 10-year-old's grasp of English. Sometimes not even that. Teachers encourage students to learn English in nurturing ways. It is not uncommon for a student to ask a question in Spanish and receive the answer in English.

The majority of students come from Spanish-speaking countries: Mexico, Honduras, Cuba, El Salvador. A number of Vietnamese students enrolled the first year. They were followed by Iranians last year and students from Thailand and the Congo this year.

Enrollment fluctuates between about 200 and 325 students and mirrors immigration patterns in Austin and Travis County.

The immigrant population in Travis County has exploded in the past decade, increasing 230 percent from 1990 to 2005, according to a Travis County report.

About half of the 148,000 immigrants living in the county were born in Mexico, and about one-quarter are from Asia. Significant numbers also come from Central America and Europe.

Some students have been separated from their parents for almost as long as they've been alive, plucked from refugee camps, forced to walk or swim across borders.

"This is an opportunity for them to better their lives. That is why we're here," Garza said.

Not all International High teachers are bilingual, but all have bilingual education training. Texas elementary school students who don't speak English may be taught in their native language for part or most of the day, but at the secondary level, students are taught mostly in English. Extra support is given as needed.

At International High, teachers across subject areas try to use common vocabulary words, grammar strategies and writing prompts to boost students' English proficiency. Students are required to take a reading course, an elective at the district's other high schools.

Teacher Wilma Martinez said she is awed at times by the students' dedication to their studies.

Last spring, one student stayed until 8 p.m. to finish the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills, an untimed test. She had started at 8 a.m.

"Her dad came at 5 to pick her up. He waited three hours for her outside," Martinez said. "These students come with more challenges, and they are still expected to pass the same test that everyone else has to pass. Our students give it all they've got."

District officials said it is in students' best interests to return to traditional campuses after two years, citing research that shows that immigrant students perform better when integrated with native English speakers.

But theory does not always translate well to reality. Early on, the Johnston High community clashed with district officials over perceived resources given to students at International High, and fights among students at the campus broke out; community members said they were over cultural differences.

Last year, 100 students "graduated" from International High to their home campuses. On the first day of this school year, in August, more than 30 failed to show up, Garza said.

Staff members fanned out to the neighborhoods to track the students down. When they found them, the fears about starting over spilled out.

"The thought of leaving us and going somewhere new was kind of overwhelming," Garza said.

International High is unlike similar schools in other cities, most of which are ninth- through 12th-grade programs. Austin officials said they did not want to segregate the immigrant students by keeping them in a separate school for four years.

But a four-year school ensures a long-term commitment to the student, said Claire Sylvan, executive director of the nonprofit Internationals Network for Public Schools, a New York-based consortium that focuses on developing and supporting schools for immigrant students with limited English proficiency.

"You retain the level of support that is required for students who may still need significant support as they are developing their language skills, their cultural skills and their academic skills," said Sylvan, who did not criticize Austin's model.

Concerns about segregation can be addressed, she said, by making a school open enrollment, putting it in the wing of a larger high school and allowing students to participate in extracurricular

activities at the larger school. The International High at Johnston does all three.

Nationwide, schools for immigrant students have helped keep them from falling through the cracks. In New York, graduation rates at such schools have ranged from 60 percent to 80 percent, compared with less than 30 percent citywide for English-language learners. Sylvan said the dropout rate at their schools is in the single digits.

Elias Barahona, a 17-year-old Honduran immigrant, enrolled at Johnston when his two years at International High were up. The senior said he'd have no doubts about going back.

"When I'm here at International, it feels like I'm in my house," Barahona said. "And I feel free."

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International High School students' birth countries

122 Mexico

19 United States

16 Honduras

11 Myanmar

8 Cuba

5 El Salvador

4 Congo

2 Vietnam

1 Brazil

1 Burundi

1 Guatemala

1 Iran

1 Nicaragua

1 Sierra Leone

1 Taiwan

Source: International High School

Timeline

1985

The first international high school is launched as a collaborative effort between the New York Department of Education and LaGuardia Community College to address the growing population of recent immigrant students with limited English proficiency.

1993

A second International High School opens in Manhattan.

1994

A third campus opens in Brooklyn. The schools form an unincorporated network called the International Schools Partnership.

2004

The formal Internationals Network for Public Schools is created with a grant from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation to develop more campuses. Internationals opens two more schools in New York.

Independently, Austin opens International High School at Johnston High School.

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