

## Del Valle High School

5201 Ross Road  
Del Valle, TX 78617  
Principal: Jean MacInnis

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Del Valle High School opened in Del Valle, TX in 1956 and, in 1999, relocated to a new campus in Del Valle, just outside Austin. The school serves a student population of approximately 2,300, the majority of whom are identified as economically disadvantaged, which the state considers to be a risk factor that can contribute to dropping out.

- ◆ High (9–12)
- ◆ 73% Hispanic
- ◆ 17% Black
- ◆ 9% White
- ◆ 1% Asian
- ◆ 7% English Language Learners

In the 2006–07 school year, the transition to high school proved to be a significant challenge for much of the freshman class; 30% did not advance to tenth grade, and 43% of the class failed one or more core courses. School administrators and teachers immediately went to work to identify the sources of the problem and design effective strategies to help every student reach graduation. As a result, the school launched a Freshman Academy and began using middle and high school data to identify at-risk students, guide instructional decision making, and track student progress using an Intervention Database. The school also emphasizes a rigorous and relevant curriculum for all.

In 2009 and 2010, the Texas Education Agency recognized Del Valle for providing exceptional high school completion and college readiness programs, by which time the efforts were showing significant effects. In the 2009–10 school year, the percentage of ninth-grade students failing one or more courses fell to 26%, and only 6% did not advance to tenth grade.

### **The Freshman Academy**

In 2007, Del Valle launched the Freshman Academy “school within a school” to support student success in the pivotal ninth-grade year by providing an engaging learning environment geared to the specific educational and developmental needs of ninth graders. The Freshman Academy allows freshmen to take all of their classes, eat lunch, and participate in other learning activities, such as tutoring, in a single dedicated wing of the school. Teachers report that this environment fosters a sense of safety and belonging among freshmen.

Del Valle has implemented specific programs within the Freshman Academy as part of larger dropout prevention efforts. A required freshman course, Pathways to Success (PTS), helps students to build the organizational and study skills needed for academic success and provides time for tutoring each week. Using middle school data and teacher recommendations, PTS teachers place students into either a Tier I or Tier II class. Both tiers follow the same curriculum, covering time management, study strategies, and graduation requirements, but Tier II classes are smaller to provide more

individualized instruction and support. PTS teachers work closely with core teachers to monitor student progress.

PTS teachers also work closely with students to ensure assignments are completed; teachers may ask students to re-do an assignment that was left at home. PTS teachers may also act as advocates for students in team meetings and initiate parent-teacher meetings. Through this ongoing support and guidance, PTS teachers get to know their students well and can reinforce Del Valle's message that failure is not an option.

Teachers and administrators group Freshman Academy students into four smaller teams loosely built around a common feature or need, such as English language learners or pre-advanced placement (pre-AP). To promote diversity, Del Valle avoids using completely homogenous groupings within teams. Each team is overseen by four core teachers (one from each subject), Tier I and Tier II PTS teachers, a counselor, and an administrator, who meet twice weekly to discuss and plan interventions for students having academic or behavioral difficulties. These meetings and their outcomes are documented in the school's Intervention Database, which tracks each student on a range of performance, behavior, and intervention indicators. Teachers report that teaming helps to develop strong relationships among teachers and between students and teachers.

### **Using Middle School Data**

Each spring, teachers from Del Valle meet with middle school teachers to discuss each incoming ninth-grade student and examine data on a range of performance and behavioral indicators. Using middle school grades, courses taken, attendance, services provided, and number and type of behavior referrals, Del Valle determines course placement, PTS tiers, and teams. This allows the school to create course schedules and team groupings driven exclusively by student needs. Teachers continue to examine student data and monitor their progress throughout high school so they can immediately intervene when a student begins to go off track.

### **Enhancing Academic Rigor**

Del Valle also seeks to provide a relevant, rigorous curriculum to all students. The school has established standardized course expectations for general and special education. For example, all tenth-grade English classes teach the same lesson and activities on the same day. Co-teaching with content teachers allows special education teachers to build and maintain their content knowledge and sustain the expected level of rigor in their classrooms. While the content is the same across all classrooms, the level of support varies depending on the needs of the students in the classroom. For example, the special education teacher might be in a classroom with the content teacher either half the week or every day.

Del Valle supports the development of high-quality teaching and engages multiple strategies to improve teacher effectiveness. Professional Learning Communities, which are grouped by subject areas and meet daily, provide teachers with time to coordinate, plan, and review data. Additionally, Del Valle has identified a group of teachers who are skilled in co-teaching, engaging students, and maintaining high expectations in their classrooms. Through peer presentations, these teachers share their knowledge and

expertise with colleagues. Del Valle also partners with the service center in the region to provide teachers with opportunities to develop co-teaching skills.

Teachers purposefully plan engaging, relevant activities for students. For example, to illustrate and encourage discussion around the concept of trajectory, one math teacher had students build a water balloon launcher that was then used to try soaking teachers. For a lesson about Martin Luther's 95 Theses, a world history teacher had his special education class post grievances to a fictitious announcement that the school had instituted a pay-for-grades policy. This lesson stimulated students' thinking and provided them with an opportunity to engage in a complex discussion. Such opportunities among students with significant reading disabilities may not have occurred had the teacher used less engaging teaching strategies.

In 2011, Del Valle graduated its first class that began high school in the Freshman Academy. The school has improved its graduation rates to date, and staff members are committed to continued improvement and to efforts that will help prevent students from dropping out of school.