











GRAND PRAIRIE COLLEGIATE INSTITUTE NAMED **NATIONAL BLUE RIBBON SCHOOL**

The STEM-focused campus is only the second Texas public charter school in the Dallas-Fort Worth area to achieve the U.S. Department of Education honor.

By *Helen Riney*

Photographs by Stewart Cohen

If you're looking to capture the attention of anyone within the walls of Grand Prairie Collegiate Institute (GPCI), just say "dream." You can bet you'll hear a resounding "big" in return.

"Dream Big" is just one of the mantras woven into the fabric of GPCI, a newly minted National Blue Ribbon School, where staff members know the name of each of the nearly 400 students who attend the charter school, serving grades six through 12.

"We are a smaller campus, with very much a family-type feel," says Felicia Layne, GPCI's chancellor. "We are focused on preparing our scholars for life after school in college and beyond. And so, I think having high expectations for our campus and our kiddos makes us a little special."

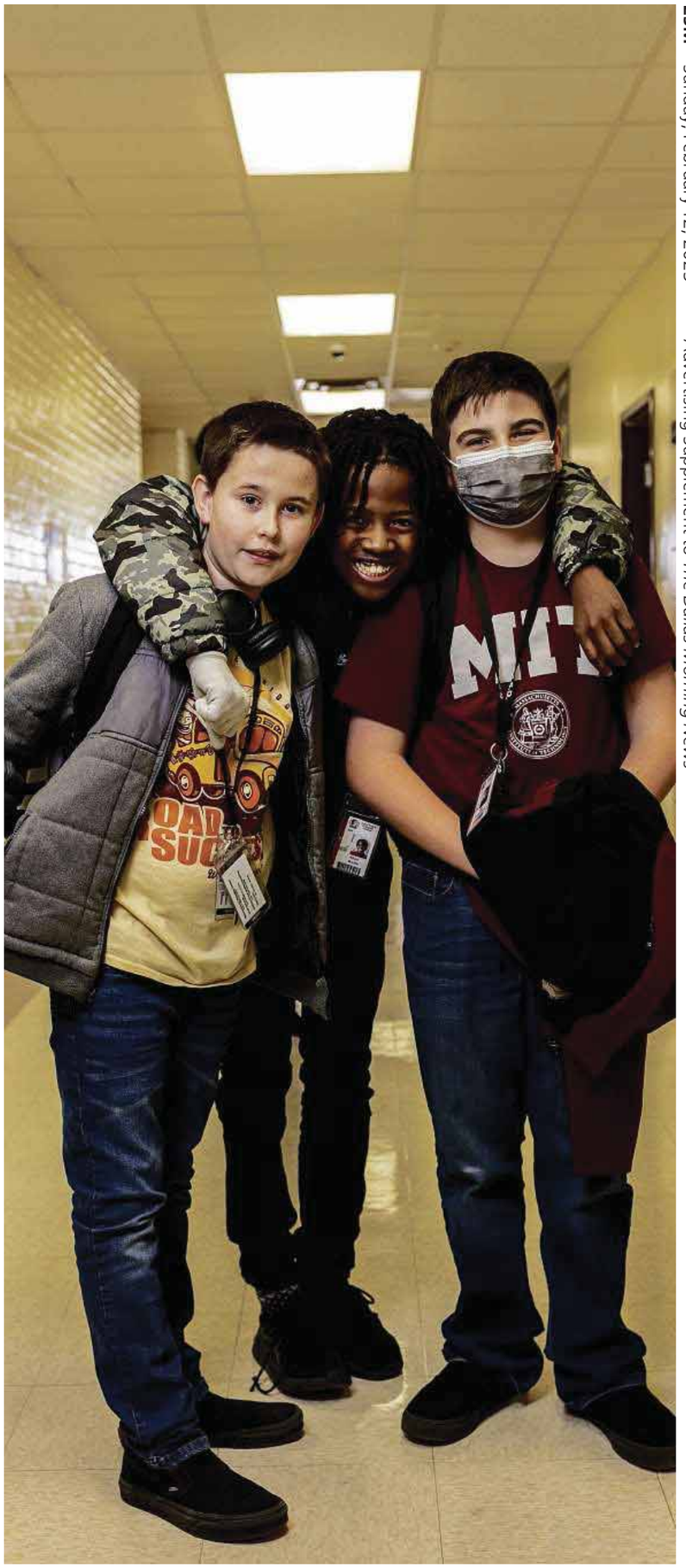
The STEM-focused campus and its Blue Ribbon status are distinct in more ways than one. GPCI is one of 31 Texas schools named a 2022 National Blue Ribbon School among 297 nationwide. The richly diverse institution joins Cockrell Hill's Golden Rule - Sunnyside as only the second Texas public charter school in the Dallas-Fort Worth area to achieve the U.S. Department of Education honor. Unlike most charter schools managed by a nonprofit, GPCI flies under Grand Prairie ISD banner as an in-district public school of choice.

"We are extremely proud of the students and staff of Grand Prairie Collegiate Institute," says Grand Prairie ISD Superintendent Linda Ellis. "This designation is the result of their commitment to educational excellence. The National Blue Ribbon School award affirms and validates the hard work of students, educators, families and communities in striving for — and attaining — exemplary achievement."

Founded in 2013, GPCI is a relatively new kid on the educational block. The open-enrollment school's intentional programming provides advanced, rigorous courses designed to remove the barriers in education and create pathways into demanding fields within biomedical science, computer science, aerospace and civil engineering.

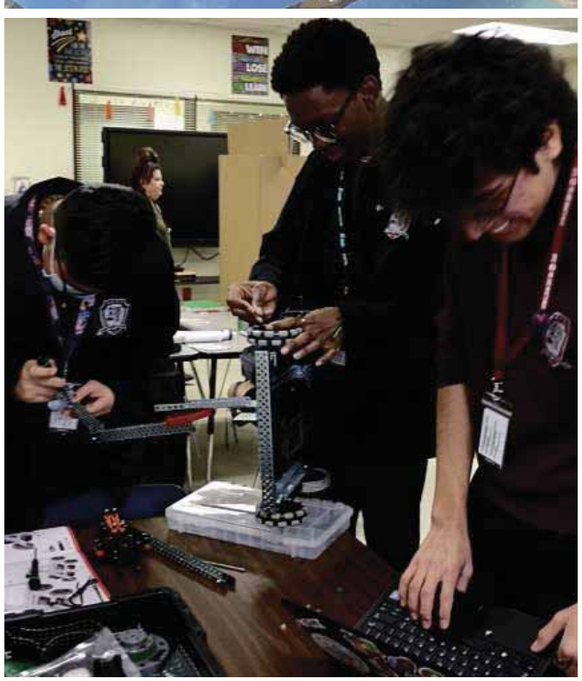
Accepted students can take advantage of small classes, school-issued personal technology devices and a contemporary learning environment.

The school blends virtual learning with traditional classroom leadership. At the same time, scholars are being exposed to science, technology, engineering and mathematics courses, and earning significant college credit, notes Grand Prairie ISD's Sam Buchmeyer, the district's public information officer.



At Grand Prairie Collegiate Institute, students confidently believe in the mantra "We are what's next."





Courtesy Grand Prairie Collegiate Institute
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Unique learning opportunities are everywhere you turn. Activity-, project- and problem-based (APB) instructional design centers feature hands-on, real-world activities and problems that help students understand how the knowledge and skills they develop in the classroom connect to everyday life. Seniors take part in workplace learning through internships aligned with their program of study.

"Teaching at Grand Prairie Collegiate Institute is an opportunity to encourage the next generation to dream and realize so much of what they can do and the opportunities they have for their future," says Rodney Kasper, chair of the technical education department.

Kasper teaches high-demand classes like small-engine tech, robotics and digital electronics, and aircraft tech, where students analyze a blueprint and construct timelines to build an RV-12 airplane housed in a hangar on campus.

Leadership development is also ingrained in every facet of the school's success. Being part of SkillsUSA, a national nonprofit partnership of education and industry, has empowered high school senior Jasmine Alvarez with leadership, collaboration and communication skills that will serve her well long after graduation.

"It has expanded my way of thinking when faced with challenges," Alvarez says.

We are what's next

For Layne, who has been described as the "heartbeat of the school," serving as chancellor has been an "interesting yet rewarding ride." The 24-year educator, in her fourth year leading GPCI, learned the fine art of always "being ready for the unexpected" as she deftly steered the campus during the pandemic's unknowns — and beyond.

Layne is proud that her school achieved its Blue Ribbon status for being an exemplary, high-performing campus where 100% of students go on to college or choose military service after graduation. The result is students who confidently believe in another mantra: "We are what's next."

"We truly believe that we are preparing the next generation of world changers, whatever it is that they want to be," Layne says. "But, I think we are still a hidden gem. We know we haven't arrived, so to speak. This is a great recognition, but we still want to strive for excellence and greater heights." ■

2022-2023
CAMPUS DEMOGRAPHICS

61%
Hispanic

23%
Black/African American

9%
White

5%
Asian

2%
Two or more races

68%
of students qualify for free lunch or reduced lunch pricing

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