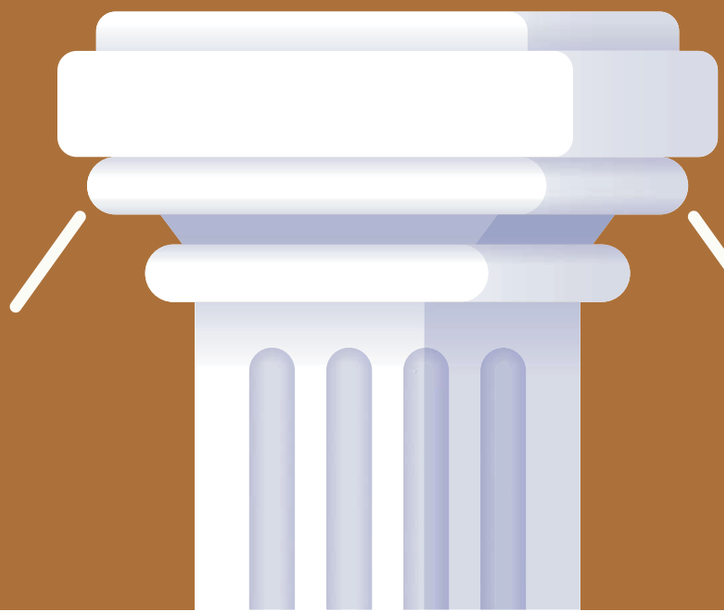
3 NORTH TEXAS STUDENTS REFLECT ON **THE BENEFITS OF ATTENDING A CHARTER SCHOOL**

From learning Mandarin Chinese to pursuing careers in finance and STEM, these students credit their experiences at charter schools for their drive to succeed.

By *Helen Riney*



"I pledge to be a servant leader and put others before myself. I will serve others, respect others, and encourage others. When I graduate from ILTEXAS, I will be a healthy person with a strong mind and character who speaks at least three languages. I will change the world."

— Student Creed, International Leadership of Texas

MIA BROWN



Mia Brown's first introduction into the world of charter schools was at a grocery store.

Brown's mother spotted a young girl clad in the familiar plaid skirt, burgundy blazer and knee-high socks, well known in the hallways of International Leadership of Texas. ILTexas is a free public charter school serving more than 22,000 students at 24 Dallas-Fort Worth, Houston and College Station campuses. When Brown discovered the charter school's student requirement for academic instruction in English, Spanish and Mandarin Chinese, she was hooked.

"I started looking into ILTexas and thought, 'Wow, this school has the opportunities I need to succeed,'" says Brown, who originally hails from Columbia, Maryland. "I enrolled, and the rest is history."

These days, Brown, a 2022 graduate of ILTexas' Garland High School, studies management information systems at the University of Texas at Austin. This summer, Brown will take part in Citi's highly selective Personal Banking & Wealth Management Technology (PBWMT) program, a paid 10-week college internship for women in IT.

She credits the skill sets honed in high school, like the importance of always being on time and pushing through academic adversity, as key to her continued success in college.

"When I got to ILTexas, it was like nothing I had ever seen before," Brown says. "Having those values drilled into me has really benefited me and my experience [in college]. I went back to ILTexas over my winter break to thank the teacher who inspired me to go the STEM route. Because before her, I never thought I would see myself in Management Information Systems."

In the Dallas-Fort Worth area, roughly 115,000 students attend public charter schools, representing 8% of all public school students, according to the Texas Public Charter Schools Association.

Tuition-free, open-enrollment charter schools typically feature smaller class sizes, rigorous college-prep curriculum and more freedom to innovate in education. Charter schools are held to the same financial and academic standards as other public schools in their district or state, yet often offer more flexibility to adapt to an individual student's needs.

Every student's journey with their charter school is different, but it often starts with a keen desire to learn. Twenty-one-year-old Kiscada Hastings, who grew up in Fort Worth, chose to attend a charter school in eighth grade because he was always looking to "push himself academically," something he didn't always get the chance to do at his previous school.

KISCADA HASTINGS



Hastings, the salutatorian at ILTexas' Keller-Saginaw High School, is set to graduate this spring from Yale University with a degree in economics. He has already secured a finance position doing equity research and is also interested in pursuing a career in the business of music. At ILTexas, Hastings' teachers saw potential in him from the start and encouraged him to apply to academically rigorous colleges, something he doesn't think he would have done without them.

But it wasn't just about the academics: From an eighth-grade historical road trip along the East Coast to playing drums in a jazz band and hosting Chinese New Year festivities, his high school experience was filled with a lifetime of memories. He also found a place where he could get involved with anything he wanted. And, if Hastings couldn't find what he wanted to do, he was free to create something on his own.

"I had so much fun," Hastings says. "I had such a variety of experiences and such a wide support system. It helped me develop a mindset of trying new things, exploring lots of different interests and giving my all in the world, [which] I brought with me to Yale."

NICK GOLDRING



Nick Goldring attended ILTexas' K-8 campus in Garland and Garland High School. After high school graduation in 2019, Goldring traveled to China as part of a Rhodes Scholar educational trip before attending the Beijing Language and Culture University. He continues to work on his bachelor's in Mandarin Chinese, a language unknown to him before his days at his charter school.

"The moment I began to study Mandarin Chinese, something inside me just woke up," Goldring says. "It's like I had this hidden ability inside me all these years. It has transformed me into the person I am now, and I'm able to grasp the language easily." Goldring credits his school's exclusive leadership curriculum for preparing him for life after high school. He learned what it takes to lead and advance ideas as he moves toward his July 2024 graduation date.

"IL Texas is a very extraordinary place," Goldring says. "When they say they want to turn students into potential future leaders [and] they want the best for students — they really mean it." ■













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."

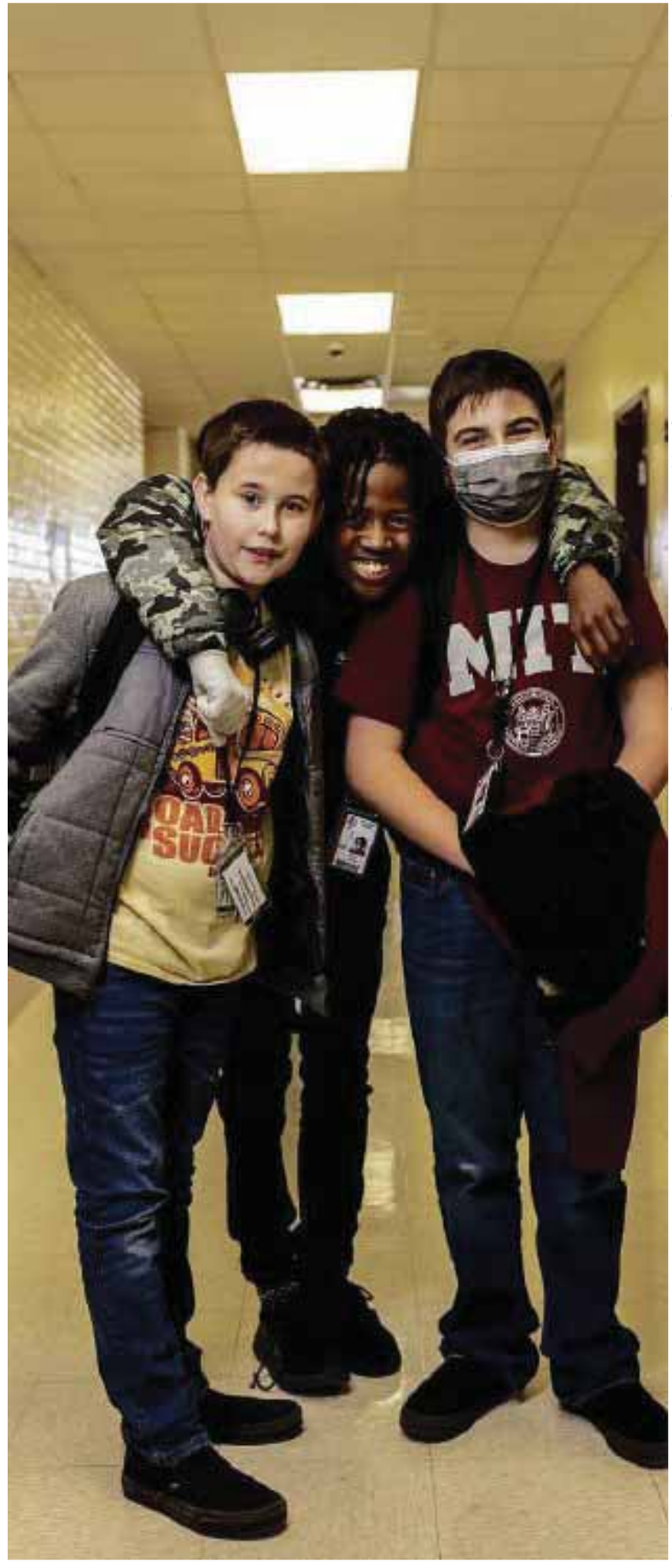
The STEM-focused campus and its Blue Ribbon status are distinct in more ways than one. GPCI is one of 31 Texas schools named a 2022 National Blue Ribbon School among 297 nationwide. The richly diverse institution joins Cockrell Hill's Golden Rule - Sunnyside as only the second Texas public charter school 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
Students are exposed to science, technology, engineering and mathematics courses, and can earn significant college credit.

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

> "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."
>
> *— Grand Prairie ISD Superintendent Linda Ellis*