



HISD WORKS TO LOWER DROPOUT RATE

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Channel 13 Eyewitness News

HOUSTON (KTRK) -- A few weeks into the school year, the Houston Independent School District's new boss isn't saying much about his plans to keep children in class.

Dropouts are one of the biggest challenges for HISD Superintendent Dr. Terry Grier. This week, we're taking an In Focus look at just how bad the problem is in Houston and what can really be done.

HISD's dropout rate is at least 18 percent. Some outside agencies put it at twice that number. Whatever the number, it is the biggest challenge the district's new superintendent faces. So this week we're looking at what works in HISD to keep kids in school. We're profiling three of the many good ideas at work in Houston. We start with a group working to keep kids in school one student at a time.

For years, before she ever knew it, Leticia Estrada was being watched. Not that she did anything wrong, not that she couldn't get through high school on her own, just that someone knew she might need a little push along the way. And when she got to Jefferson Davis High School as a freshman last year, she did.

"Last year I had

problems with one teacher," said Leticia.

It was a new school for her but with an old problem for Houston. At least 30 percent of the ninth graders she started with won't graduate. Three out of ten freshman drop out of Davis, and the eyes watching Leticia were determined she wasn't going to be one of them.

"They get on my list because they are lucky," said Nakita Johnson of Project GRAD.

Johnson works for Project GRAD, a non-profit educational group that focuses its efforts at five of Houston's most at-risk schools for dropouts.

This is not some big think tank. You can find Johnson most days at lunch in Davis' library with Leticia, one of the 100 students with whom she works. They talk sometimes about grades, sometimes about teachers.

"She's cool, it's just that you don't want to make her mad," said Leticia about one teacher.

Sometimes they talk



LETICIA ESTRADA

about how to manage all the things in the young woman's life. Leticia has a lot on her plate. Not the least of which is Leticia's two-year-old son, Rafael.

"I go home and take care of my baby, do my homework and want to get good grades," said Leticia.

She's getting it done now, but last year with a newborn, Leticia almost became one of the statistics in that massive dropout rate, telling her mother it was just too much.

"It was difficult having homework and paying attention to him and paying attention to my work," said Leticia.

That is where the one-on-one support comes in, not just for young moms, but for students who need help seeing past today.

"When you are making decisions every day about that day and making sure that you've got your needs met for that day, it is very hard to focus on a bigger goal," said Ann Stiles.

Project GRAD says that is its strength, making sure kids see themselves not just as high school graduates but as college students. To make it seem a little more real, Project GRAD offers a \$4,000 scholarship to virtually anyone who graduates from the five high



NAKITA JOHNSON helps Leticia.

schools they work in.

The program is showing results. At Davis High School, graduation rates are up 13 percent since Project GRAD started working there.

When we asked Leticia if she envisions herself in a purple graduation gown, she replied, "Absolutely. I'd be feeling happy, excited, tell someone to pinch me."

The project has turned a potential dropout into a believer. Leticia not only expects to finish here, but be the first in her family to enroll and graduate from college.

So who will be most proud of Leticia?

"My baby. He will say, 'My mom finished college, why can't I not do that too?'" she said.

District-wide, Project GRAD says graduation rates are up 27 percent in schools it is active in. College enrollments are up 320 percent since they moved in.

The group gets one-third of its money from the federal government, a third from HISD, and the rest from private donations.