

Charter school rated 'exemplary'

By RACHEL SLADE

Thousands of Georgetown ISD faculty and staff celebrated the successes of their students this summer, patting themselves and their colleagues on the back for a



Richard Rickey
CEO of Orenda Education

job well done in the 2010 Texas Education Agency accountability ratings. But theirs weren't the only scores spreading smiles in Georgetown this year.

In its first year of operation, Gateway College Preparatory School — the first and only public charter school in

Williamson County — earned an "exemplary" rating from TEA.

Richard Rickey, CEO of Orenda Education, the school's nonprofit operator, says he's proud of the results — and knows exactly how they were accomplished.

"One of the things I've always believed is the key is ...to assess where the kids are — and then it's what do they need and let's get it to them," he said. "We identify early on and get right into the interventions. ...This rating is really just hard work."

The school's geographic boundaries nearly mirror the county's, and Mr. Rickey says the student population was pulled from all over this year, with about two-thirds from Georgetown and Round Rock and additional students from across the region, coming from home schools, a variety of public ISDs and private schools that don't extend into high school.

"We thought we knew exactly the type of students we'd see, but we've found that a variety of kids can be very successful here," Principal Steve Werlein said. "Our typical student seeks a high level of academic rigor, a high level of positive interaction with peers and ...interaction with teachers. and wants to actively

Gateway College Prep School was open only to ninth- and 10th-graders this past school year. But next year it will take on sixth- through 11th-graders and expand capacity in a temporary facility between Georgetown and Round Rock located at 3320 County Road 111 adjacent to the Triple Play Sportsplex.

Enrollment hit about 120 between the two Gateway schools during their first year of operation, but 240 have already enrolled in Gateway College Preparatory School for the 2010-2011 school year; and enrollment at Gateway Tech High School — which earned an "academically acceptable" rating, the highest available for those classified as alternative high schools — is expected to hit near its new capacity of 120.

Enrollment at the college prep school will continue to expand in the coming years as well; by the 2011-2012 school year when the school moves to its permanent location on a tract of land just south of Georgetown's Inner Loop, it will be a kindergarten through 12th-grade campus with a capacity of 550 students. And additional phases of the campus will continue increasing its capacity.

"Our maximum enrollment there will be 950, with no more than 100 in any graduating class," Mr. Rickey said. "So we'll be a 2A UIL school that's small, but not too small."

Orenda Education officials say they're not concerned about duplicating their exemplary results because the charter model — and their vision for the schools' development — maintains what they consider the primary factors behind their success in the long term, including small, single-gender classes, slightly longer school days and more of them (Gateway students attended school 10 more days than the typical ISD calendar this past year).

"These are things I think make for becoming 'exemplary,'" Mr. Rickey said. "It's a culture that helps bring about the work that's needed and the attention that's needed."