

Harding Charter Prep marks 10 years

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Using a 1920s building abandoned by the Oklahoma City school district, a group of educators brought a one-time middle school back to life by creating a college preparatory culture and a sense of community.

That was 10 years ago, and Harding Charter Preparatory High School was born.

'Bringing rigor'

Carole Kelley, a founder and former head of the school, was the college adviser at Putnam City North and had argued with the school board one too many times.

"I knew there had to be a better way to bring rigor to the classroom, which in turn meant opportunities for students" Kelley said. "The first principal, Mr. Caram, and the first seven educators created a mission, which then became our culture. Everyone knew it"

That mission was to provide each student with an academically challenging, educational experience through an Advanced Placement curriculum, which would prepare graduates for success at a four-year university.

Janet Barresi, now state Superintendent of Education, wrote the charter in 2003 and consulted with Kelley, who had attended a breakout session regarding Advancement Via Individual Determination (AVID). That, coupled with the fact that Barresi wanted to do an all-AP curriculum, established their mission.

Back then, Sally Ziebell was the Russian teacher at a school in the Putnam City district for 12 years before that program was cut. Then Kelley presented her with the opportunity to be the first world languages teacher when Harding opened. Ziebell thought it was a risky proposition, but "wanted to be in on the ground floor"

"I thought, 'This is a school that every educator dreams of being able to be a part of. I want to be a part of it from the beginning'" Ziebell said.

The school received its charter in May 2003 and planned to start classes in August. Most students enrolled at the last minute and formed a small student body. Harding started with 65 students and eight total staff members.

"Harding had been abandoned as a middle school and was not in very good condition, so we had tremendous amount of work on the physical plant to do" Ziebell said.

Taking care of each other

Today, Harding Charter Prep, as it's commonly known, has nearly 500 students and has generated such high demand that it held its first lottery for admission in March 2012. During the lottery, more than 180 prospective freshmen applied for only 135 openings.

What sets it apart, Kelley said, is the sense of community among the administration, faculty, parents and students.

"We always took care of each other" she said. "We created a fund where if a student needed a coat, we bought one; if a student needed a college application fee, we paid it; if a family didn't have a Christmas tree or food for dinner, then the parent organization donated one. There was always a sense of community"

Harding can boast many accomplishments and recognition both locally and nationally. The school recently held "A Decade of Excellence" celebration where it was designated to receive the Blue Ribbon Award from the U.S. Department of Education. Many original students, faculty members and administration attended to look back on the beginning of the school and help celebrate its decade in education.

The Blue Ribbon Award recognizes excellence in education, where students perform at high levels and have significant academic achievements. In Oklahoma, there are only five other schools that have received the award.

"The Blue Ribbon Award has everything to do with the administration, the faculty and the direction this school has been going" Principal Justin Hunt said. "The path was already set when (the current administration) got here"

Pride and honor

In 2009, Harding was ranked No. 197 on Newsweek's list of best public high schools in the United States; it bumped up to No. 68 in 2010. In 2013, Harding was ranked No. 1 in Oklahoma by the Washington Post.

For current students, that's a badge of pride and honor.

"I'm really proud that we're able to achieve such high academic standings, and I feel honored to be a part of the No. 1 school in Oklahoma" said Ashley Medice, current student council president.

Medice attributes the school's achievements to the passion of its founders and their desire for students to excel. She believes the school deserves more recognition for its achievements and hopes that recognition will help the school to grow.

Looking to the future, Hunt wants to focus on maintaining Harding's success by further improving test scores and continuing to provide a great education to anyone who otherwise would not be able to receive it.

"We just got to keep on trucking forward" he said.



Harding Charter Preparatory High School in Oklahoma City is celebrating its 10th anniversary.

PHOTOS BY JIM BECKEL, THE OKLAHOMAN



Standing with Miguel Rios, foreground right, at the entrance to Harding Charter Preparatory High School, are Principal Justin Hunt, center, and Rios' fellow seniors, from left, Ashley Medice, Riley Hubbard and Cydney Washington.



Conde Currat

Art teacher



Sally Ziebell

Language teacher