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FRISCO CENTENNIAL HIGH SCHOOL

Centennial High School, Frisco
photo by Reavis Z. Wortham

EDUCATING FRISCO

by natalie medigovich

ONE OF THE MAIN DRAWS TO A COMMUNITY for house hunting families tends to be the school system in place. Once the children are old enough to attend preschool, and especially when they are old enough for public school, most parents tend to do their homework and research what's out there.

No school is perfect, but there are many who say Frisco is the place to be for more than just great shopping – it's where they want their children to go to school. With the population explosion that garnered national attention also came the expansion of the Frisco Independent School District (FISD).

FISD is fully accredited by the Texas Education Agency and brags about students' SAT scores being above the state average and approximating national averages. With 14 elementary schools, four middle schools, two high schools, one special programs school and one alternative school, Frisco Independent School District is working hard to grow along with the population. It is the fastest growing school district in Texas with an enrollment that has increased by 22-30% annually for the past several years.

The Frisco Economic Development Corporation's Economic and Demographic Fact Book says "With smaller – and more – facilities, FISD is standing by its commitment to provide the best learning environment for individual students." In relation to this statement, the document also elaborates on the most recent (and multi-million dollar), bond proposal that passed in 2003 which includes the construction of 22 new schools: 18 elementary campuses, three middle schools, and a fourth high school with plans for a fifth.

Striving to maintain excellent parent involvement, the school district has much of their information on the well-detailed and constantly updated FISD website: www.friscoisd.org.

But in addition to public school, what other options do parents have and what influences their decision when choosing a school, if any, to send their child to?

WHERE TO START IN THE EDUCATIONAL PROCESS

Options abound for Frisco families searching for just the right school for their preschool-aged children. Though there are those who choose not to enroll their younger child in preschool, many parents and guardians want their child to learn from early on how to wait their turn and share while surrounded by hands-on educational experiences that are the backbone of the formative preschool years.

Business construction in Frisco is not always another dry cleaner, bank or video rental store as may be the perception when driving past some of the sites en route to the next errand. Several private, Christian, Montessori and other kinds of preschools are anxious to give tours to prospective

*“Options
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parents, with a few offering a free trial or sit-in session. Some have billboards posted on their future sites, proclaiming the all-important (for those who have missed these deadlines) “Now enrolling!” nomenclature even if an open field is all the viewer sees.

SPECIALTY PRESCHOOLS

One of the newest offerings for preschool children is the Spanish Schoolhouse, a language immersion based preschool currently meeting at First United Methodist Church in Frisco.

“Five years ago we started in Vicki’s (the director of Spanish Schoolhouse) living room with a few girls,” said assistant director Monica Ramirez. “One of the moms was on the PTA in Plano and asked us to start an after school program, and it just took off from there.”

Spanish Schoolhouse went from a six-school program in Plano and expanded to Carrollton and Allen. All of Frisco elementary schools now offer after school Spanish programs run by Ramirez and Vicki Kelli. Kindergarten through third grade has the highest enrollment, but most of FISD’s after school Spanish programs have 40 kids enrolled, with a ratio of 8 students to one teacher.

Five children enrolled in Frisco’s preschool program last year, but this year there are 85 preschoolers coming one, two or three days a week to learn the popular language from one of eight native speaking teachers.

“We start off by speaking English first and then translating to Spanish, but after a month, everything except discipline sometimes – because we want them to really understand what’s going on – is in Spanish,” Ramirez said. “The kids love it and catch on quick. It’s the really little ones who especially want to keep on going.”

Kelly Mehnke, who is in charge of Children’s Ministries at First United Methodist Church, thought enrolling her son Jackson in Spanish Schoolhouse for one day a week when he wasn’t in his two-day preschool program at the church, was an opportunity too good to pass up.

“He just loves it,” Mehnke said. “He uses his Spanish words all the time. I get corrected and in trouble for mispronouncing words! My other son is nine and I wish this program had been around when he was in preschool. They can learn foreign language so much easier when they are little.”



Peyton Salzer and Trey Fulbright from Spanish Schoolhouse photos by John Scott Glass



Mehnke added that the teachers speak to the parents in Spanish when they come to pick up their children, so along with her four-year-old’s help; she is sort of learning Spanish too.

“In the beginning Jackson used to say ‘Mom, they’re not talking to me,’ but that only lasted a little while,” Mehnke said. “This is just such a perfect complementary fit to his other preschool. They do shapes and songs and math, but not so intense that they lose the kids.”

Unlike the “normal” preschool, specialty preschools cost a bit more. Spanish Schoolhouse charges \$100 a month for one class per week (from 9 am to 2 pm, the average preschool school day), \$190 a month for two days a week and \$280 for three days. Most children enrolled at the church go three days a week.

“People are really starting to like us,” Ramirez said. “There is no other program like this in Dallas that I know of either. We want to offer a five-day-per week preschool program, but we’d have to move to another building for that. We like being centrally located in Frisco where we are now though.”

THE MONTESSORI WAY

Word has it that parents interested in Montessori education will have multiple choices with four Montessori schools now available in Frisco.

“I went to private schools and parochial schools all my life so I guess I have a bent for them,” said Shelly Chamberlain, whose son Matthew went to Frisco Montessori Academy from preschool through kindergarten, and is now enrolled in first grade

in FISD. Her daughter, Lauren, goes to preschool at Frisco Montessori Academy now. “When we first moved to Frisco and I toured all the preschools nothing struck me as really academic or nurturing as Frisco Montessori Academy and I wanted Matt to be happy.”

Chamberlain added that her son was making great academic progress in reading so she didn’t want to interrupt that success.

“It’s not that I am pro Montessori, it’s just that it was working for him,” she said. “It wasn’t hard for him to transfer to public school at all. He is so happy to be with his peers and neighbors now. He sort of missed that (being with his exact age group

“The kids love it and catch on quick. It’s the really little ones who especially want to keep on going.”



*Learning and playing is fun at Bright Beginnings Christian Preschool at Cornerstone Community Church in Frisco.
photos by Leah Beckham*



all the time) in Montessori. The public schools are definitely winning me over.”

Some 230 students attend Frisco Montessori Academy, the first Montessori program offered in Frisco, now celebrating its sixth year. Children from two-years-old to sixth grade can attend the private school. Almost 90% of Frisco Montessori Academy’s enrollees live in Frisco.

“Some of our students were in public school first, or go to public school and come back,” said owner Pat Lisi, who was a Montessori teacher for 17 years. “When they do leave it’s usually because they want them to know their neighborhood friends, but they always notice how much more advanced they are; like being able to read when entering kindergarten.”

Music, Spanish and computer classes are offered at Frisco Montessori Academy as well as drama. Students of all ages put on different plays for their parents, and partake in other special offerings such as planting, harvesting, and preparing the vegetables in their beautiful garden all year long. Montessori education is very tactile, for example, using sand paper letters to teach the alphabet and other activities more “traditional” schools usually don’t offer.

“Children can learn at their own pace and teachers are more of a guide than a lecturer in Montessori education,” Lisi explained. “We don’t sit at the front of the classroom, we give the children individual attention. Just come see the spark of imagination in their eyes. Work is like play to them.”

Once again, small class size is stressed in this Frisco school. Frisco Montessori Academy students are treated to a student-teacher ration of 16 to 1 for younger children and 24 to 1 in older classes.

CHURCH-BASED PRESCHOOLS

One of the lesser known Christian preschools, Bright Beginnings, has been located in downtown Frisco for five years where Cornerstone Community Church used to hold its worship services before they outgrew the facility and had to move to Rodgers Elementary school to congregate.

“The preschool is a ministry of our church,” said director Tina Mullins, whose children went to Bright Beginnings before enrolling in FISD. “Many, many times it’s been quoted to us that we are a diamond in the rough. Parents like us small even though our facility is older and in the historical district; we have a good reputation.”

Word of mouth has brought a total of 80 children to Bright Beginnings, with eight classes offering a student to teacher ratio of 8 to 1 or 10 to 1 depending on the age group. Mullins stresses that her preschool does not teach any specific religion, just that “God loves you and there are certain ways He wants you to act.”



"I think it's important that kids learn morals from an early age and I don't think they can get that at a public school really," Mullins said. "We have a bible story every day and are a very loving and nurturing environment. We don't go to chapel like other preschools (because we don't have one) but we sing Christian songs and pray before eating lunch and use the Lifeway curriculum. A lot of parents like that."

"I definitely knew Lindsay would go to a Christian preschool," said Frisco mom Mary Jane Monaghan. "I want her in this type of atmosphere. I have a strong Christian background and went to church all my life, and my husband went to Catholic school. I think there is a huge difference in the quality of care children get at a church run preschool. Lindsay walks around the house all the time singing 'Jesus Loves Me.' It is so sweet."

HOME SCHOOLING – ANOTHER OPTION

For those parents who chose not to use their apportioned tax money to send their children to public school, home schooling may be an option for those disciplined enough to be their child's teacher.

Debbie Mauelshagen decided 20 years ago to home school, when resources were few and far between. She is now one of the facilitators for Frisco's Home is School support network, and one of about 50 families in the area who decided to teach their children at home. Frisco's Home is School meets the last Monday of the month at 7 pm at Stonebriar Community Church.

"I am not anti-public schools," Mauelshagen clarified. "I just think the number one pro is that I am involved in their education and there to see the light in their eyes when it clicks. It is the most awesome thing. I still get goose bumps thinking about it."

Mauelshagen said families from Frisco, Plano, and Little Elm come to the support network searching for advice on how to organize their day, complete housework, or work with a child who won't sit still or sings all day, for example.

"It can be very easy to allow yourself to become isolated when home schooling," she said. "You also have to be careful not to burn out. You have to make it a point to network and get involved in co-ops and play groups and things. The first year is the hardest; I try to tell newcomers to commit to at least two years."

Mauelshagen said the bond she has with her oldest child, now

22, is a reflection of flexible learning schedules and opportunities to self-pace and expand upon curriculum that validates her home schooling experience.

"Laura still comes over and wants me to stay up until midnight to talk," Mauelshagen said. "I know when she has kids of her

own she wants to home school them too. Back in the 80s friends and family laughed at me (for home schooling) and called it child abuse, but when a friend was told her child had to repeat kindergarten, she came to me.

"I just think home schooled kids are better educated because they are allowed to learn the way they learn best," she said. "We can spend three weeks hunting frogs if it holds their interest and goes along with the curriculum."

Mauelshagen added that one of her friends recently put her child back in public school because the child really needed more socialization and opportunities like band. The friend's other child is still home schooled, however.

"I really liked being home schooled and I played on a club soccer team with all these public school girls and it was no big deal," said Laura Mauelshagen, now a junior studying social sciences at the University of

North Texas. "Sometimes other kids would tease me but I just ignored it and thought it was a normal part of being a kid. I also got to go to prom in Denton with a bunch of other home-schooled kids – some from as far as Waco – so I don't think I missed out on anything. A lot of colleges really like home schoolers because of our high GPAs. All of my home schooled friends go to college."

Huge book fairs with thousands of vendors are offered for the newbie home schooler as well as the more advanced looking to change textbooks or curriculum. Arlington will host the next large book fair May 7 and 8. In August the North Texas Home Educators Network will be holding a smaller version at the Plano Convention Center. LAMB Co., based in Allen, hosts a monthly home schoolers orientation as well for those researching this option.



Legacy Christian Academy student, Paige Herrick
photo by John Scott Glass

"It can be very easy to allow yourself to become isolated when home schooling."



Legacy Christian Academy student, Matt Smith
photo by John Scott Glass

STRONG ACADEMICS FAVORED IN PRIVATE SCHOOLS

Advanced academics seem to be the motive behind enrolling students in another education venue – private schools. No longer are the choices strictly Catholic, though according to the U.S. Department of Education, 30% of private schools in the United States are Catholic, with 17% of those parochial. As for enrollment figures, a whopping 49% are Catholic, with 25% of enrollees being parochial.

Most private schools in the area are non-denominational although Christian based. Many offer scholarships but all require a statement of faith, as well as the purchasing of school uniforms, as part of admissions.

“Academically, kids who transfer here (from public schools) are about a year behind,” said Frisco’s Legacy Christian Academy’s (LCA) director of admissions, Becky Johnson. “Some parents who have left us for financial reasons come back because their children are ahead of their classmates and then fall behind. About 85% of our students are from Frisco, but we have parents from Oak Point, McKinney and North Dallas.”

Johnson, who has been a part of LCA since its inception three years ago and before when they met at Frisco Bible Church for three years, said admission requirements range from a diagnostic versus achievement testing, various application

forms and fees, and the need for parents to be involved in a local church. At least one parent must profess Christ as their Savior as well.

“We don’t want to be teaching the children something they are not learning at home because that would be a disservice to them,” Johnson explained, referring to the opportunity for students to pray freely and learn from the Bible. “They are taught from God’s perspective.”

LCA has 500 students enrolled with each class at a maximum of 18 students. Many parents work at the school to help offset the often-hefty price tag that accompanies private education. For example, five-day kindergarten costs \$6,500 per year and high school is almost \$8,000 per year. The parents whose children attend say it’s worth the additional cost.

“No matter what education my son gets he will get the word of God,” said Glen Sanders, who’s 6-year-old son Geraud attends LCA. Sanders, an ex-professional football player turned school lecturer about the perils of drugs, used to be athletic director at LCA before traveling to reach more children. “We go to church, Bible study, and Sunday school so this way he gets even more. Legacy is a family environment where teachers are very involved and they let the parents be very involved too. Geraud loves it there.”

“I really love my school and have been there since first grade,” said 14-year-old Carlyn Powers, who attends the once worlds largest car dealership property turned private school in Carrollton. “I guess I’m a little shy so it’s really nice to have smaller classes. All of us are really, really close.”

About 50 students from Frisco attend the eight-year-old Prince of Peace Christian school. This fall will mark its first graduating high school class with the number of graduates at 14.

“We started out in 1980 as a pre-K to sixth grade but parents kept asking us for more so we eventually had to move to a bigger spot,” said Becky Jennings, director of public relations and events for Prince of Peace. “Private schools are a safe educational environment. We’re not



focused on clothes on the body but what goes into the children's minds."

Jennings said that Prince of Peace students take the IOWA standardized state tests, but that private schools have the choice of purchasing a variety of standardized tests ranging from the Stanford to the Peabody to numerous California ones. She, like all the other private school administrators, commented on the near 100% college enrollment plans for high school students.

"I didn't want Carlyn to be a little apple in a big orchard," said mom Carla Powers. "She and her friends are very close knit and all want to go to college. We go to church there too. I'm a dental hygienist and I practically clean everyone there's teeth. We are like a big family."

CONTINUING AND ADULT EDUCATION CHOICES

According to Frisco High School counselor Rick Rickard, 55% of FHS graduates attend a four-year college, 34% go to a two-year college such as Collin County Community College, with the remaining 11% entering the work force or military.

"Starting in ninth grade we go into classrooms and discuss the importance of the SAT and ACT and the importance of the types of classes you take," Rickard said. "There is a monthly senior newsletter that talks about scholarships and financial aid, and all of the counselors post things on our bulletin boards. It is an on-going process, but most kids who go to college already have their minds made up. It's a personal decision, I think."

Along with the Preston Ridge campus of Collin County Community College District, 11 schools for higher education, from Austin College to Texas Woman's University fall within a 60-mile radius of Frisco. High school students wishing to earn dual credit can enroll in some courses as well as adults wishing to further their education.

The four-building campus of CCCCD opened in the fall of 1995 and is in the process of expanding its library, art studios and music labs. By adding a large lecture hall, more science and technology classrooms and more faculty offices, this expansion process will make the Preston Ridge campus the second largest of the four campus (including the two satellite extension campuses in Allen and Rockwall) district.

About 18% of the total CCCCD enrollment attends the Preston Ridge Campus. Six percent of this is made of up students

ages 13-17 (usually working on dual credit courses), with the largest number (52.4%) coming from the 18-22 age group. Almost 84% of students attending the Preston Ridge campus intend to transfer to a four-year university.

"The district has been growing significantly and this was a planned thing with the bond election two years ago," said Preston Ridge campus's director of public relations, Lisa Vasquez. "We also offer continuing education courses, and had 145 students enrolled in those courses this past fall. Frisco residents represent 6.6% of our continuing education students district-wide."

FISD has offered continuing education courses for 23 years and offers many of them free of charge. These adult education courses range from defensive driving to English as a Second Language to golf, and meet on either Tuesday or Thursday evenings at various schools in Frisco. Classes are offered twice a year, usually in the fall and winter.

"We mailed out 25,700 fliers this past semester and that number has increased every year, said Treasa Costillo, who has been the coordinator for FISD's adult education courses for the last five years. "We offer these classes to anyone too, not just Frisco residents, which a lot of people don't know about. A lot of people just want to better themselves by taking a financial class or need stress relief, so they take an art class, for instance. The average class size is six to seven people. All the classes always have enough people."

Costillo added that although the program does not make a profit, the positive feedback far outweighs the costs of mailing the fliers.

"I find instructors who are certified teachers, business persons and/or general public," Costillo said. "We also have a person that is available at night on the first night of each course to register students last minute, help with locating classes or just provide a smiling face."

Costillo said some courses are offered only once in a while, while others are repeated due to demand.

"Our most popular classes are computer programs, financial help seminars, ESL and GED classes," Costillo remembered. "So many people are trying to better themselves for personal and career advancement. Of course, some classes are just pure fun!"

Natalie Medigovich is a freelance writer from Frisco.



photo by John Scott Glass