

**2011 Small District Winner**  
**Splendoria ISD**  
(north of Kingwood, Houston area)

*Up from Poverty*

Just beyond the wealth of the Woodlands, north of Houston on Highway 59, lies Splendoria. Known for being a speed trap, the town has a population is 1,275. The school has a population of 3,408, drawn from the 77 square miles that comprise the school district. The average cost of a home in Splendoria is \$60,000, with the majority in the \$25,000-\$30,000 range. Not just house trailers but multi-family trailers dot the landscape. Many parents work in major plants in the Houston area, sometimes traveling two or more hours a day to get to and from work. Of the 1040 school districts in Texas, Splendoria is 31<sup>st</sup> from the bottom in terms of property value.

An article on November 7, 2007, in the **Houston Chronicle** cited a study by Johns Hopkins University concluding that Splendoria ISD had a “dangerously” low graduation rate of 74 per cent. But since that article appeared, things have changed. No longer a dropout factory, Splendoria’s student completion rate for 2009-2010 was 95.2 per cent, up from 92.4 per cent the previous year. It’s the highest graduation rate in Montgomery County. People are moving to Splendoria because of excellent schools.

What changed?

**Groundwork**

Before current superintendent Thomas Price came to Splendoria, the school board had laid some groundwork. They had a vision for increasing their career and technology training, so they built buildings that would house those vocational offerings, even before they had the programs. Some of the board members had become vocal about low student

achievement. Dana Daniels is beginning his 11<sup>th</sup> year on the school board. A fireman, he is in schools a lot. “The kids here are just as smart as kids in other parts of Texas. But we had a history of gaining 3 points on the TAKS [Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills] while the statewide average was a 5-point gain. It made me angry that there seemed to be more emphasis on what makes adults happy than on student achievement. One administrator (who is no longer here) used to say, ‘We were just one Hispanic student away from being recognized.’ My response was, ‘I’m tired of hearing that. It’s time to move on!’”

When Thomas Price became superintendent, he spent the first four months listening and observing. He found a school district in trouble; the elementary school had to have a waiver from the Texas Education Agency to be rated as acceptable, and achievement was going down. Price also observed that there were no clear staffing guidelines: e.g. some schools were overstaffed for no apparent reason. He hired Regina Young as executive director of finance. Here’s how she describes what she found on her arrival four years ago: “Splendora ISD was circling the drain. The board had been told the district was in the black, but they knew something was wrong. Actually, the district was in the red by \$800,000. They were overstaffed. Over time, the fund balance had dropped from \$6 million to \$2 million.”

### **Digging Out**

In town meetings Superintendent Price learned that the community wanted curriculum that is relevant for the students and one that supports college success. With various groups he began to repeat what has become his motto, “Our zip code will not determine our children’s future.”

When he implemented staffing guidelines that were open and transparent, some educators in the district reacted negatively, and the school board began to take some heat. But they stood firm. According to board member Dana Daniels, “We gave Price our grand vision. The board’s job is oversight, not management. Price was chosen because of the way he presented himself. It was tough at first. We stuck to our guns. We had a lot of “Old Splendor” people working in the schools. But Price wasn’t focused on accommodating the adults who worked in the schools; he came in with an emphasis on kids. He said, ‘I’m sorry it makes you upset. We’re here to provide education.’ It was tough for a year, but never once did I think about changing my mind. The resistance was a good thing.” To support the board’s resolve, Price brought in consultant Bob Thompson from Lamar University to push their thinking to the next level and make their vision a reality.

Simultaneously, the district became financially healthier through re-allocation of resources and conservative budgeting. Regina Young says, “We got back on our financial feet by not budgeting for growth. So when we did grow and more state dollars came, we put that money in the fund balance.” Federal stimulus money went to fund pre-K. The district began to serve breakfast to all students. Superintendent Price says, “Poverty is poverty. Our kids go hungry at night. All students in Splendor eat breakfast free. Our turnaround in achievement corresponds in timing with serving breakfast for everyone.”

*Being in poverty is rarely about a lack of intelligence or ability.*

**Ruby Payne, A Framework for Understanding Poverty**

## **No Stranger to Poverty**

Tommy Price grew up poor. His single mom was a 9<sup>th</sup> grade dropout. In grades 1-9, Price attended 20 schools. His mother, who just wanted her children to be happy, was a first-generation immigrant from Poland who didn't understand the importance of education for her children's future success. Price says, "Teachers at my high school made me believe I could succeed and gave me opportunity. I was one of those kids whose mom worked at night while I took care of brothers and sisters, so getting homework done was difficult. I'm the only high school graduate in my family. No one ever got hold of my siblings and encouraged them. Although I believe my sister is smarter than I am, she didn't finish high school. They thought she had a learning disability. I think she simply had gaps in her learning because we moved so often. In poverty, nothing changes. You're hungry. You struggle. No one fails on purpose. Failure is a learned behavior."

*Four reasons one leaves poverty are: It's too painful to stay, a vision or goal, a key relationship, or a special talent or skill.*

Ruby Payne, **A Framework for Understanding Poverty**

## **Success Measured Four Years After High School Graduation**

Splendor measures their success not by what students do in high school but four years later. For a community of families in generational poverty whose norm was their children dropping out of high school before completion, a culture change was required. And this culture change had to involve the whole community.

The local justice of the peace sided with what the school district was doing and took a tough stance on truancy. His attitude is: if you don't go to school, you go to jail.

Superintendent Price pointed to one student whose frequent absences put him on the road to being a dropout. He made a turnaround and went a whole year without missing a day of school. Now he's attending the University of Texas at San Antonio and has made the Dean's list twice.

Superintendent Price also tightened the curriculum and accountability procedures by implementing the C-Scope curriculum. All administrators are required to make 25 classroom visits per week, an average of five per day. Administrators meetings are held at 4:00 p.m., after students have gone home. Clearly, the top priority is what's going on in classrooms—that is, preparation for college and career

Splendora has about a dozen career pathways, including

- Veterinary technician
- Business
- Health science with nursing assistant certification; planning to expand to licensed vocational nurse (LVN) certification
- Cosmetology
- Aquaculture (science renovation grant)
- Microsoft office specialist
- Welding
- Culinary arts (Director of Career and Technology Academies Kevin Lynch says, “Culinary arts is bursting at the seams. Over 100 seniors signed up for food science. They can get food handler license and safe serve certification. That gets them in the door at technology and culinary schools.”)
- Floral Design

Lynch has been in Splendora in the old days and continues in these new ones. He says, “When I was hired as an ag science teacher, I found more welding rods stuck in the ceiling than were being used in shop. My goal was for students to develop common sense and the ability to use their hands to make a living. I haven't ventured far from that, but my rigor has increased.” He notes that many large companies in the Houston area are

within driving distance and in need of skilled labor. They pay well and have good benefits. With the right career training, Splendora students have a good future.

Lynch is spearheading the aquaculture lab that will open this fall. It's the new program that everyone is most excited about. The school district had a grant for a new science lab but not enough money or space in the high school to build a traditional one. So they built a stand-alone greenhouse and aqua lab to grow algae. A biofuel company in Pennsylvania offered equipment for a cut rate. Excitedly, business manager Regina Young said, "This is a new challenge for everyone."

The total cost of the aqua lab was only \$164,000. It houses a classroom, wet lab, and dry horticulture lab. Students will be converting algae to diesel. Lynch thinks Splendora may be the only high school in the U.S. doing this as part of the STEM (science, technology, engineering, mathematics) curriculum. Splendora has a partnership with the National Algae Association to assist their scientific research and advanced biotechnology. The aqua lab is funded with career and technology monies and team-taught through the ag department, as well as the science and math departments.

Regina Young is an unusual business manager in that she has a passion for curriculum and actively participates in all curriculum meetings. She says, "I can tell from the budget whether we're going to do well in science and math. If we have no expenditures, we're not going to do well. I keep challenging them. We're not there yet." She's even more unusual in her unswerving commitment to put all dollars into the classroom. Even though the law allows for a portion of grant monies to be used for administrative purposes, she refuses to do it and cites ethics as her reason. Every dollar goes to the classroom.

A major goal for the technology and career program is for Splendor to develop and maintain its own TV station. (Insert more information on the TV station.) Always, Splendor administrators stay attuned to preparing students for successful careers.

The superintendent meets with two student groups every month. He says, “Students are our customers. We want them to have a purpose beyond high school: college or career.”

*Kids do not come to school for Shakespeare. They come for relationship and progress-based instruction.*

Thomas Price, Splendor Superintendent

### **The Wildcat Way**

Every school in Splendor has the same colors—red and white—and the same mascot—the wildcat. A simple document has been created, in red and white, to graphically depict “The Wildcat Way.” Beginning with full-day pre-kindergarten for everyone, the chart shows the three K-6 campuses feeding into the 7<sup>th</sup> and 8<sup>th</sup> grade early college outreach and college success transition programs. Then, through career and technology academies, college credit, and dual credit, the district’s goal is clear—“Every student will take college courses that lead to college or career certification.” Reference to this vivid graphic begins every administrative meeting, to keep them focused on their purpose.

(I have the PDF file for the publisher to insert.)

### **Personal Graduation Plan**

To support that purpose, at grade five the district administers the Kuder Career Inventory and each student creates a personal graduation plan. Counselors and

administrative staff meet annually with the student and parent. That's 275 students per grade level in grades 5-12. Director of Federal Programs and Special Initiatives Tempie Smith says, "We're successful because students and parents know they're loved and supported. These conferences are mostly positive encounters to celebrate the student's accomplishments. We have a collaborative partnership with parents." These meetings are well planned, with an Excel spreadsheet delineating by grade level what information is to be communicated so that everyone involved in that child's education is on the same page. No child falls through the cracks of the system.

### **Early College High School**

Modeled after high schools in Hidalgo and Pharr-San Juan-Alamo, Splendora High School is an early college high school. Through a partnership with Lone Star College in nearby Kingwood, Splendora High School graduates may earn up to 61 credit hours, or two years of college, by the time they graduate from high school.

The second largest community college in Texas, Lone Star College has five campuses with 80,000 students and spreads over 1400 square miles. They work with 11 ISD's who have dual credit or early college programs. The president of Lone Star College, Katherine Person, at one time was president of the Splendora School Board, before Thomas Price became superintendent, at the time when the board was laying the groundwork for his leadership to take the district to the next level.

Rebecca Riley, vice president of instruction for Lone Star College, recalls the first meeting with Splendora parents. School officials had gone door-to-door, encouraging parents of eighth graders to come to a meeting to talk about their children's participating in an early college program. Many of these parents were incredulous; older siblings might



have dropped out of high school or gone straight to work. College was a dream most of them considered beyond their reach. Fearfully and cautiously, they came to the meeting. Rebecca Riley recalls the session. “They seemed afraid of what their children might be exposed to. I let them know we would not be censoring college work, but we would make the material age-appropriate. For example, we taught music appreciation rather than art or theatre to minimize the age-appropriateness issue.”

For Splendor students, the early college program means two years of college at no charge to the students. The district pays the \$60 per class fee, and the college waives tuition. Splendor also pays for textbooks, testing, and a laptop for every student.

These are not watered-down courses; in early college classes teachers are required to have a master’s degree and 18 graduate hours in the course they are teaching. For the first two years of the program, college teachers travel to the high school campus; in the last year, students are bused to the college campus for morning sessions, then return to the high school campus for the remainder of the day.

The success of this program depends in part on the extensive preparation first given to students in how to be a good college student. This training includes a four-week College Success Transition Academy in June of each year, sponsored by the school district. But the college also provides training to college teachers who are teaching less mature students, adapting the instruction to their maturity level while maintaining the rigor of the academic coursework. These instructors learn to recognize signs when students are disengaging and to make adjustments that hold the students’ attention. Finally, parents learn how to be parents of college students.

Rebecca Riley says, “Splendor has never pushed back from standards, even in the face of complaints from parents.” Bill Coppola, executive director of academic partnerships and initiatives for Lone Star College, adds, “Once the community is proud of the school, everyone holds their heads high. The community wanted to change; [until Thomas Price came] they just didn’t know how to do it.”

This summer (2011) two students went to the Phi Theta Kappa (college honor society) Convention in Boston. A community member and Lone Star College picked up the tab.

### **What Makes Splendor Work**

In the words of Kevin Lynch, “The board buys; the superintendent drives; the business manager commits funds.” Regina Young agrees, “It starts with the school board and the community.” But Splendor’s success also has a great deal to do with how well they manage money. Because they do not budget for growth, Splendor ISD has been able to lower the tax rate by \$.02 while rebuilding their fund balance. Their current rate for maintenance and operation is \$1.04; interest and sinking is \$.29.

Splendor educators wear many hats. There are not separate meetings for finance and curriculum; there are simply administrators’ meetings, held after school hours so that people can focus on the topics for discussion without worrying about what’s going on in the classrooms. The finance officer is expected to contribute to curriculum meetings and vice-versa. The superintendent, always in attendance, expects free exchange of ideas and lively discussion that includes conflict. Tommy Price believes “This collaboration brings out the best in people. We’re doing something special; people want to be part of it. Everyone talks to kids about academics and college. Even bus drivers understand that

we're undertaking a PK-16 initiative, and they are the first school person those young people see every morning. They feel responsible to help them start their day right."

### **Close Connection Between the School and the Community**

As is probably true of most small communities, the schools are the heart. Eleven-year board veteran Dana Daniels says, "Schools are a HUGE part of our small community, even more than church. We go to church once a week; our children go to school every day. The influence is profound. As a community goes, so the state goes, and so the country goes. The things we do in this community can affect the whole country. We make a difference in a small way, and it ripples out."

Bank President Gary Gardner puts it like this: "Splendora has come a long way. We're experiencing culture change. From 600 students in the 1960's, we now have over 3000. The community has bought into the importance of education. The community accepted the fact that we needed to change course. What was good for my generation isn't enough for my kids." Gardner was on the school board during the years when they were building buildings and planning for the career and technology programs that are now in place.

He notes that east Montgomery County is poised for growth, with large parcels of undeveloped land for sale. Exxon recently relocated over 8,000 employees to the Montgomery County area. As chairman of the board of the Chamber of Commerce, Gardner believes that the next major growth in the area will be in east Montgomery County. With that growth in mind, the Chamber set these goals:

- Improved quality of life
- Economic development

- Trained, well-educated work force

To meet these new demands, a highly skilled workforce is needed. Thanks to the visionary accomplishment of Splendora ISD, the educational system is ready to meet this challenge. All it takes to move forward, Gardner says, is to “Educate the general public. It’s a true labor of love.”

*No problem can be solved from the same consciousness that created it. We must learn to see the world anew.*

Albert Einstein