

Schools break new ground

TISD, TAMU-T join forces to introduce math, engineering at an early age

By LYNN LAROWE SANDEFUR
Texarkana Gazette

Texarkana may be a nationwide example in pairing public and higher education, native son Ross Perot said Tuesday.

Perot returned home to be the honorary guest speaker for Tuesday's joint ground-breaking ceremonies for Texarkana Independent School District's Martha and Josh Morriss Mathematics and Engineering Elementary School and Texas A&M University-Texarkana's Science and Technology Building.

"You are so far ahead of the rest of the country. I don't know of any other schools doing this," he said. "I never

dreamed it could happen here. It is an honor to be in 'Texarkana.'"

The collaboration of TISD, Texarkana College and TAMU-T shaping students into academic winners has far-reaching implications for the region and the community, say elected officials, educators and business leaders.

"I honestly believe this will become a model replicated throughout the United States," said George McWilliams, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board member and local attorney.

The idea is to introduce children to the concepts of math and engineering at the elementary school level so they

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Texas Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst speaks at the joint ground-breaking ceremony for Texarkana Independent School District Mathematics and Engineering Elementary School and Texas A&M University-Texarkana Science and Technology Building Tuesday morning. Staff photo by Evan Lewis

School

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will be able to garner success in an ever-competitive global workplace.

"It takes about 15 years to turn a child on to engineering, and math and engineering will rule the world," said Scott Bruner, TISD school board president.

Competition will be an important factor in the curriculum.

"Last year, the United States produced 70,000 engineering graduates. China produced 700,000," said Texas Lt. Gov. David Dewhurst, the featured speaker.

A more educated work force will attract business and help improve the region's economy, said State Rep. Stephen Frost, D-Atlanta.

Texarkana Chamber of Commerce Member Bob Nelson agreed.

"This is a great day for Texarkana. Science, math and engineering are the wave of the future for economic development," Nelson said. "What's happening here will attract new people and business to the

area."

The switch from a natural-resource based economy to one of academics and technology is going to increase incomes and improve the region's economy as a whole, said Bruner.

Speakers and guests expressed pride regarding the collaborative efforts of college leaders, elected officials, public school leaders and the business community.

"It is so amazing to see TAMU, Texarkana College, and all the schools partnering together to benefit the community. This puts us on the cutting edge," said Texarkana College Board Member Molly Beth Malcolm.

TC will be partnering in future trade programs.

Tuesday's ground breaking is part of an ongoing tradition.

"This story began 117 years ago," said Texarkana, Texas, Mayor James Bramlett. "It began in 1889 with the creation of TISD."

"In 1927 Texarkana College was formed with 109 stu-

dents. Today we have over 4,000. In 1971, East Texas State University was formed and in 1996 it merged with A&M. Today we are celebrating even more expansion."

A sea of guests watched with excitement as orange- and maroon-handled shovels were thrust into piles of dirt from the construction sites of TISD and TAMU.

Highland Park Elementary schoolchildren were accompanied by members of the Texas High School leadership program in a launch of colorful red, blue and orange balloons.

"We have the eye of a tiger, the determination of a bulldog and we soar on the wings of an eagle," said Bramlett, as he referenced each school's mascot, eliciting a cheer from the crowd.

The business of educating has already begun. Engineering professor Dr. Doug Green began teaching a college level class to Texas High School students in August 2006.

"I thought I would have to lead very gently but I was surprised at how well-prepared the students were," he said. "When these eager young minds reach a decision regarding a college major, they will have engineering high on their list. These students have been a pleasure to teach."

Students who complete classes in computer science, electrical engineering and more are eligible to receive dual credit at both the high school and college level.

"We are going to have some students leaving high school with their freshman year of college almost behind them," said Dr. Larry Sullivan, TISD superintendent.

The educational opportunities will not be limited to engineering and math, Sullivan said. A skilled trades program and culinary arts institute are in the planning stages.

The skilled trades program holds particular interest for George Moore, assistant super-

intendent of alternative education and Texas Middle School principal.

"The trade school cooperative will be great for those kids with talents in areas besides academics. This program will allow students who are good with their hands to develop skills that will allow them to enjoy economic success and job satisfaction."

The elementary school classes will prepare students for their positions in high school, college and university and parents have their children lined up for these already.

"We have a few spots left in the third and fifth grades, but all the other grades have waiting lists," said James Henry Russell, assistant superintendent of business and support.

The 61,000-square-foot building will open in August 2007. Texarkana architect David Lamm said ideas from local engineers went into the design of the school. Lamm described windows that would allow stu-

dents to see water running in pipes that comprise the building's plumbing.

Getting the money to complete the projects has been a group effort.

Funding for the A&M campus comes from many sources. Approximately 375 acres of land has been donated by private citizens and the city. TAMU-T president Stephen Hensley thanked private donors such as Martha and Josh Morriss, Ross Perot, Truman and Anita Arnold and others for their contributions of land and money.

About \$92 million in Tuition Revenue Bonds has been allocated by the state legislature for the A&M campus.

The elementary school will cost about \$9 million in construction and \$1 million in equipment. Funds are coming from loans, the district fund balance and the general operating budget. The land for the 10.2-acre elementary school campus was donated by Martha and Josh Morriss Jr. and family.