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## “Teaching to the Spirit of Every Child”

An Interview With Ramona Treviño, Principal/CEO  
The University of Texas Elementary School



**Ramona Treviño, Principal/CEO  
The University of Texas Elementary School**

**I** T's 7:45 a.m. and students at The University of Texas Elementary School (UTES) are assembled prior to class to have breakfast, chat, and study. The energy level in the room is high. A few parents are visiting with their children or talking with teachers. Ramona Treviño, Principal/CEO, notes that several students are reading independently or with a friend. She praises the students for doing what she believes is a key to success: "Practice, practice, practice." By the time Ms. Treviño has said "practice" the first time, all the students have joined in on the second and third "practice." They know the concept. Ms. Treviño reinforces it throughout the school day; often using The University of Texas Longhorn football team victory in the Rose Bowl as a reminder of how "practice, practice, practice" does pay off. Students at UTES know that the victory was special to the university and to Austin. They also know that they were part of that victory by virtue of this school's status as a charter school operating under the auspices of The University of Texas at Austin. As the start of class approaches, several students are chosen to lead the group in the Pledge of Allegiance, The Pledge to the Texas Flag, and the Peacekeeper's Pledge, the school-wide peace plan designed to bond students and teachers each day.

**R** amona Treviño, the Principal/CEO of UTES since its inception in 2003, took some time out of an extremely busy schedule to discuss her work, the school's mission and some of the characteristics that make UTES such a special place to learn and work.

**Robert Leos:** I'm sure that being the first Principal/CEO of The University of Texas Elementary School has offered some wonderful professional opportunities as well as numerous challenges. What were some of your thoughts as you were making the transition from being a very successful principal in the Austin Independent School District to leading a charter school that was just starting up?

**Ramona Treviño:** 10 years experience as an assistant principal and 7 years as principal of Zilker Elementary were very helpful. I knew what needed to be done. I knew what furniture would be needed, which instructional materials we would use, the type of teachers that would best meet the needs of the school and the students. I saw this as an opportunity to create a research-based demonstration school and I thought hard about what that school would look like. As soon as I was hired I knew it had to work. I knew I had to articulate the vision of the school and create a comprehensive curriculum program. The school suddenly became a piece of the university to which a variety of colleges could connect. There are numerous connections within The University of Texas--Social Work; Educational Psychology; Fine Arts; Human Ecology; Health and Nutrition; Physical Education; Kinesiology; Instructional Technology; Spanish; and Speech and Language. This was an opportunity to break down some walls that had been separating



THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS ELEMENTARY SCHOOL

OPENED IN 2003 WITH 118 STUDENTS IN PREKINDERGARTEN,  
KINDERGARTEN, AND FIRST GRADE  
SECOND GRADE WAS ADDED IN 2004  
THIRD GRADE WAS ADDED IN 2005  
FOURTH GRADE WAS ADDED IN 2006  
FIFTH GRADE WILL BE ADDED IN 2007

EACH GRADE HAS 2 CLASSES OF 20 STUDENTS

these different colleges within the university.

**Robert Leos:** Tell us about the start-up and some of the challenges you faced.

**Ramona Treviño:** The start-up was rigorous. It took a lot of time, a lot of listening and thinking through the issues. We used Human Resources at the

university which meant that the university faced challenges as well. They had to create something new, including new job codes for elementary teachers since elementary teachers had not been employed previously at UT. The separate funding systems between the university and the Texas Education Agency was a challenge. But the idea of helping young children in east Austin, promoting the Little Longhorn idea, the connection to the future, and the full potential of the school had a huge impact.

**Robert Leos:** Let's talk about the curriculum here at UTES. According to your web site, your curriculum is based on "best practices" research. What are some examples of "best practices research" that you have implemented here?

**Ramona Treviño:** It's very exciting to have a direct connection to the university and the research being conducted there. We have a direct connection to Dr. Susan Empson and Cognitive Guided Instruction (CGI). CGI is the process of understanding deep mathematics thinking and cognitively guiding students through math. CGI has a strong research base. One nice aspect of the connection to the university is that we have a feedback loop. Dr. Empson has trained our teachers and our teachers have given her feedback on the training. Four of our teachers participated in a training session in Arizona this summer. Dr. Empson will then return to UTES to observe mathematics teaching and we get to give feedback on the training. In addition to Dr. Empson's work, Dr. Taylor Martin has created a criterion-referenced math assessment that aligns with CGI. That has never been created before and they are hoping to publish this so that others can use it.

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*"It's very exciting to have a direct connection to the university and the research being conducted there."*

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We also use the Three-Tier Reading Model developed at the Vaughn Gross Center for Reading and Language Arts in the College of Education. This model is very quantitative and is embraced nationally and within the state.

I view "best practices" as a bag of tricks. One is pulled out to fit the kids. Some students need strategic intervention, some need enrichment, and some need acceleration. Being well-versed in these approaches is something that I expect of the teachers.

**Ramona Treviño**

Ramona Treviño has been principal of the UT Elementary School since the school's inception three years ago. She came to UT Elementary with more than 20 years experience as an educator, having served as principal of Zilker Elementary School in AISD. Under her leadership, Zilker progressed in the Texas rating system from acceptable (1998 and before) to recognized (1999 and 2000), to exemplary (2001 and 2002) and has been designated as a Texas and National Blue Ribbon School. Treviño has worked as an administrator in AISD for 17 years, and also as an educator in the Hays Consolidated School District, the Klein School District, the Department of Defense Schools and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. She is currently pursuing her doctorate in the UT College of Education.

**Robert Leos:** Your web site also says, “The principal has been very focused in making technology use a best practice. . . With an 80% economically disadvantaged population, we are passionate about addressing the digital divide. We are working to become a model of technology integration using technology for diagnosis, instruction, assessment and communication.” What progress have you made in accomplishing some of your technology goals?

**Ramona Treviño:** For years the TEKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) for Technology Applications were placed on the back burner because this is not a tested subject. Technology should not just be a center at the back of the room. Technology skills are skills that should be taught directly so that by the

time students reach middle school they are well-prepared. We have the expectation that technology is to be taught on a regular basis and taught exclusively.

We were fortunate to receive a Dell Foundation grant that will enable us to blend social work with technology. This is such a unique idea to assist parents looking for resources in the community; to use the computer lab for parent training; for social workers to work with job skills; to go out to the community and use the computer to do home visits with the intent of enhancing the use of technology. There's a movement to reach parents who don't have access to technology; for every home having access to technology. This seems like such a natural place to have social work involved. Here at the school we've created a technology advisory committee that meets twice a year. It's a beautiful creation with lots of ideas including ideas about early childhood technology instruction.

**Robert Leos:** UTES is an elementary charter school affiliated with The University of Texas at Austin. There's an impression among some that charter schools do not have to comply with the accountability requirements of the state and federal government. How do you report the school's academic progress to the state and the federal government, or do you?

**Ramona Treviño:** We are a public school. We teach the TEKS and take the TAKS (Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills) and report our results to the federal government under the requirements of NCLB (No Child Left Behind). The school is considered Recognized by the Texas Education Agency and in terms of NCLB, we met AYP (Adequate Yearly Progress) requirements. On TAKS, 89% of our third graders passed the test on the first round and we achieved a 100% passing rate on the second round. Am I happy with the passing rate? Certainly, but we need to achieve 100% passing on the *first* test administration.

**Robert Leos:** UTES complies with state curriculum requirements and complies with state and federal accountability requirements just like other public schools. What are some of the characteristics of UTES that make this school different from other public schools?

**Ramona Treviño:** Restrictions on charter schools have gotten tighter and tighter since they were first approved. With charter schools there's supposed to be less bureaucracy and the instruction is teacher and research driven. Teachers make a commitment. It's different from a school district environment where a teacher can transfer to another school. When parents have a choice, they make a commitment. There is a different, higher level of commitment on the part of parents, teachers, and children. There's also a Humanness factor where relationships are built. The charter environment offers an opportunity to balance humanity and efficiency. There's an opportunity to build community. People feel empowered. We can truly teach to the spirit of every child. We have a goal of looking at each child. The flexibility and fluidness of the operation has been a remarkable piece that has allowed us to listen and adapt.

**Robert Leos:** What have been your greatest successes in the three years that UTES has been in existence?

**Ramona Treviño:** One of the school's successes has been *curriculum building*--building a clear mission as far as academics; understanding the TEKS; understanding the grade requirements; developing clear assessments.

THE PEACEKEEPER'S  
PLEDGE

I am a UT Elementary  
Peacekeeper.  
I promise to be helpful,  
truthful and kind.  
I promise to respect my  
teachers, parents, and  
friends.  
I promise to solve  
problems with my  
words.  
I promise to always do  
my best!  
You can put me to the  
test!  
I am a UT Elementary  
Peacekeeper.

Another success is definitely *building community*. We had an orientation meeting for parents last night. The meeting was primarily for new parents and we had a packed house. It's the idea of community, of relationships in the classroom, among the teachers, among a cadre of learners. I have never been so close to a community of learners than I am here. There's a constant sense of inquiry. Families feel as if this is their school. School doesn't scare them. Respecting the parents as part of the community is a really beautiful thing. They're also recognized as a part of the university community. When President Larry Faulkner recognized our school at the Rose Bowl victory celebration, it gave me goose bumps. This is the closest that many of these families have ever come to The University of Texas.

Here at UTES, we believe that kids should be seen. They should feel special and therefore act special. Wearing the uniforms with the university logo makes them feel special. They know the university colors and the core values of the university and the connection is so positive. They know that college is within reach, even if they go to another college. UTES offers a theme of opportunity and hope--for the children and the community. That has been its greatest success.

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**“Teaching to the Spirit of Every Child”  
Is the official slogan of The University of Texas Elementary School.**

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Ramona Treviño, Principal/CEO

For More Information Visit

<http://www.utexas.edu/provost/elementary>



The colorful murals seen throughout the school represent collaboration between staff and faculty, students, and parents.



The garden at The University of Texas Elementary School is used for classes in ecology and nutrition. Students plant, care for growing plants, and ultimately harvest and partake of the final product.



Photo of Austin, Texas by Steve Gamboa  
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