

TEA DESIGNATES WEST MIDDLE AND HIGH SCHOOL AS A NEW T-STEM ACADEMY

By David Truitt, Superintendent

Back in early March, the West ISD leadership team, in conjunction with the West ISD Board of Trustees, made the decision to seek a special campus designation via the Texas Education Agency (TEA) for West Middle and High School to be named a new Texas Science, Technology, Engineering and Mathematics (T-STEM) Academy. On June 1, 2016, West ISD received notification from TEA that our application was approved by the state. West Middle and High School joined twenty-three other campuses from across the state as new 2016-2017 T-STEM Academies.

T-STEM Academies serve as demonstration schools and learning labs, which develop innovative methods to improve science and math instruction across the state and nation. T-STEM Academies focus on improving instruction and academic performance in science and mathematics-related subjects and increasing the number of students who consider studying and entering STEM career fields after high school. The cornerstone of T-STEM Academy learning is student engagement and exposure to innovation and design in STEM-focused instruction and learning that models real-world contexts.

T-STEM campuses are designated based on a rigorous application process. Once a campus receives the designation, professional development and technical assistance are provided by the state, and the campus is highlighted as a showcase site for innovative instruction. There are only one-hundred and twenty-one T-STEM campuses in Texas, and West Middle and High School is now one of them. Currently, there are only five T-STEM campuses in central Texas.

All T-STEM campuses are asked to follow the T-STEM Blueprint Benchmarks. These standards include mission-driven leadership, an on-going T-STEM culture, student outreach and retention in the STEM fields, teacher development and retention, a strong curriculum framework, effective teaching and learning strategies and practices, and strategic alliances with STEM higher education partners and corporations.

As you know, West ISD is already achieving at high levels in the areas of athletics and fine arts. With this success in mind, West ISD also desires to produce critical thinkers and problem solvers who will be ready for any career or college study they choose to pursue. West ISD believes these skills are crucial for our students' success in the 21st century workforce.

West ISD believes this state designation will help guide new course offerings students can select each school year. Currently, West ISD is adding Project Lead the Way (PLTW) Engineering and Biomedical Science course pathways at the high school level to compliment the PLTW survey courses at the Middle School. There are even plans underway to add PLTW activities at West Elementary School for our youngest learners. When presented to the students at West High School, over half of the student population chose to take one of these classes. West ISD wants to offer a full and vibrant selection of courses to meet the needs of all learners, and we believe these new courses will be popular among our students, staff, and parents.

This state designation was also considered when designing and constructing the new West Middle and High School. At the center of the new campus, students will find a new, state-of-the-art ingenuity lab for any and all STEM project needs. Our robotics teams will also use this lab for club and robot design time. The new campus also includes "genius lounge spaces" that will provide informal social space for small

group and individual study (like Apple Stores, Starbucks, or Barnes & Noble). These spaces were designed to support and encourage student collaboration along with immediate access to portable, wireless technology for research purposes.

As West ISD continues to look for ways to challenge and inspire our students, the words of the new Commissioner of Education, Mike Morath, fit perfectly with our work to become the “education destination” for families in central Texas. He stated in our T-STEM acceptance letter, “The continued growth of Texas STEM academies reflects a commitment to rigorous instruction in key subjects that challenges students while also preparing them for the future.” He added, “A strong foundation in science, technology, engineering and mathematics prepares students for college, career or the military, which in turn strengthens the state’s economic future.”

West ISD is committed to ensuring rigorous instruction and learning is taking place on a daily basis in all classrooms. We want to grow, challenge, and prepare our students for wherever life leads them. We believe the T-STEM Blueprint is a great place to start. It is a great time to be a Trojan. Rise up West!