

Volunteers visit youths to get them back in class

By **DAVE SCHAFER**
CHRONICLE CORRESPONDENT

AS Joe Coleman strode up to the gate protecting the house's front door, he pushed a thumb against the cracked doorbell button. When no one answered, he stuck his hand through the fence and knocked loudly on the white wall.

Coleman is principal of Willowridge High School in the Fort Bend Independent School District. The nice white house was the home of Wendy Blanco, who should have graduated in the spring but didn't pass the math section of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills.

On Sept. 12, Coleman and 67 other volunteers drove through neighborhoods around Willowridge cajoling 106 dropouts to enroll as part of Reach Out to Dropouts.

"If these kids don't get their high school diploma, that's a problem for them economically for life," Coleman said.

Come back

So Coleman, district Superintendent Tim Jenney and district employee Norma Perez were at Blanco's door.

"We want you to come back and pass your test," Coleman told Blanco when she appeared in the doorway, slight and hesitant, one arm wrapped across her chest.

They gave her a personalized study guide. They promised one-on-one tutoring. They told her to come see them anytime she needed help.

"Those kids who worked so hard to get through school and just didn't get the diploma because they couldn't pass one section of the test, those are high priorities," Coleman said.

This was the first year Fort Bend ISD participated in the annual Reach Out to Dropouts. Houston A+ Challenge and Expectation Graduation, which had done this five previous years with Houston Independent school District, provided the district with information on planning the event, then Fort Bend ISD worked with Lamar Consolidated and Stafford Municipal school districts to build its program.

The district selected Willowridge as its pilot school because it's a community school and because Amanda Hartley, who organized the effort, knew the school from her time as dean of instruction there. The school's 72



DAVE SCHAFER: FOR THE CHRONICLE

GOING BACK: Ericka Burr, a counselor at Briargate Elementary School, right, fills out the paperwork to enroll Aventé Lewis, 17, at Willowridge High School. Lewis and her brother, both seniors, recently moved to Fort Bend Independent School District but had trouble registering until Reach Out to Dropouts volunteers visited their grandmother's house.

By the numbers

On Sept. 12, Fort Bend school districts reached out to dropouts by visiting the homes of students who didn't show up on campus this year.

Fort Bend ISD

- High schools participating: one
- Volunteers who visited students: 68
- Homes visited: 106
- Students or parents talked to: 72
- Students enrolled as a result: 20

Lamar CISD

- High schools participating: three
- Volunteers who visited students: 56
- Homes visited: 65
- Students or parents talked to: 37
- Students enrolled as a result: 8*

*18 more students committed to enrolling as of Sept. 16.

Stafford MSD

- High schools participating: one
- Volunteers who visited students: 36
- Homes visited: 29
- Students or parents talked to: 19
- Students enrolled as a result: 6

Students could enroll until Sept. 24 to be eligible to take the TAKS.

percent graduation rate on the federal Adequate Yearly Progress report was another reason the school was chosen. Schools need to maintain a 70 percent graduation rate to meet AYP standards.

To meet state standards, schools need 75 percent completion rates. Willowridge is at or above 80 percent across all categories, according to Coleman.

Coleman said 65 percent of Willowridge students are classified as low-income. Poverty creates unique problems for the students.

So the school was ready to refer students to appropriate social services, as well as pair them up with tutors and mentors.

"We have to be flexible

and work with the students to meet their individual needs," Coleman said. "Our students and parents depend on us to give them a chance to get ahead."

Giving back

Darius Hester, a history teacher at Christa McAuliffe Middle School, knew what the students were going through. He was a "troubled student" from a poor family who got little parental support for school. Dedicated, caring teachers pushed him to graduate from Willowridge in 1991.

"I want to give back and affect some sort of change," he said before going out with his group of four. "Maybe some of these kids are like me and I can have a little



GEORGE WONG: FOR THE CHRONICLE

DOOR-TO-DOOR VISITS: The mother of a student who dropped out of schools speaks with Terry High School Assistant Principal James Mayer during the Walk for Dropouts.

influence."

More than 20 staff from McAuliffe, which is a Willowridge feeder school, other Fort Bend teachers, members of the Texas Retired Teachers Association, and members of the school board were among the volunteers.

They discovered students were absent for a variety of reasons. They got jobs, or had a baby or moved into the district and didn't know how to register.

The majority of the students visited were freshmen or sophomores, Coleman said. Sharon Delasbore, McAuliffe principal, talked to four of them who had registered at different schools.

Blanco was interested in coming back. She wants to go to college.

Before they left, Blanco's mother thanked Coleman, Jenney and Perez for reaching out to her daughter.

Ninety minutes later, the Blancos arrived in the school's commons area, where counselors and social workers waited to register students and help them

balance their home issues with school.

"Anytime you have an opportunity to help people with not only their present but with their future, that's exciting," Jenney said.

Blanco became the fifth and last student of the day to register. Fifteen more enrolled Sept. 14. The other 86 received phone calls from the district, including the 71 that volunteers talked to.

At another table, Catherine Pratt, a teacher at McAuliffe and a '94 Willowridge graduate, told a former cheerleader, "You can call me anytime you need help. We'll get through this together."

Another volunteer gave the girl a hug. "You'll be glad you did this," she said. "God bless you."

The district is already looking at adding more campuses next year. But efforts to reach dropouts aren't on hold until then.

"This isn't just a one-day thing," Coleman said. "We're always working to get these kids to come back and get their diplomas."