

## Hays, Alamo looking forward to STEAM conversion

### Incoming students will have to qualify via academic test

BY RUTH CAMPBELL

[rcampbell@oaoa.com](mailto:rcampbell@oaoa.com)

As a way of enhancing their existing programs and making lessons more relevant **to** students, Hays Magnet Academy and Gale Pond **Alamo** Elementary School will convert **to** a science, technology, engineering, art and math focus in the fall.

Hays Principal Amy Anderson and **Alamo** Principal Regina Lee started their proposals **to** change at about the same time.

Hays' academic magnet designation means students have **to** qualify **to** get into the school through an academic readiness test, similar **to** Reagan Magnet Elementary, Anderson said.

**Alamo**'s focus currently is on leadership and it is a year-round campus. Lee said it will continue **to** offer an extended year and keep the leadership aspect because it fits into the skills that are needed for today's industry and it's something that's already ingrained in the students, she added.

An appealing aspect for both principals was all the **STEAM** positions potentially available **to** students.

Hays has 420 students ranging from prekindergarten (3-year-olds) **to** fifth grade and 30 classroom teachers.

The approach will be more hands-on and will involve a change in mindset for educators from the traditional "sit and get," Anderson said. "It's just a natural thing. Students seem **to** learn best that way. As educators, that's what we're always **looking** for is **to** serve them the best way we can," she added.

With any kind of change, Anderson said there is a bit of anxiety and nervousness, but with the **STEAM conversion**, mostly excitement.

"We've been preparing and moving in this direction for many years. They're excited and ready **to** get moving," Anderson said of her faculty. "The teachers and students are really who drive excitement for change.

As the leader of the school, I just feel obligated and responsible **to** meet their teaching and learning needs

. The program will likely be different at each of the campuses.

"We definitely want **to** work hand in hand because we're wanting our kids **to** collaborate and discuss. I want **to** do that with her, as well. ... We want **to** have a dialogue for teachers **to** be able **to** discuss what went well, what activities, what events. That's really going **to** start with the curriculum because we need **to** make sure that we're on the same page," Lee said.

Wanting **to** focus on what Gale Pond **Alamo** had and make it better, she discussed magnet possibilities with the leadership team and staff and then Superintendent Tom Crowe. Crowe let Lee know Hays also was moving in the **STEAM** direction.

"One thing that we are all having **to** come **to** grips with is that kids know a lot," Lee said. "They know a lot about technology. They know a lot about coding, so we have had **to** accept the fact we are all going **to** be learning together. It is amazing **to** see what kids can create and do."

Fifth-grade Gale Pond **Alamo** teacher Christa Miller has been at the campus for 23 years. Miller said she thinks the **STEAM** focus will give students a chance **to** better compete in the job market.

Some of the fields these students will go into don't even exist yet, Miller acknowledged.

"It (the curriculum) is so innovative and it teaches them **to** think out of the box, so they may some of the people who are thinking up the new jobs or the new careers because they're going **to** be able **to** step out of their comfort zone and their fixed mindsets and come up with new things for careers and for inventions and different things in the world," Miller said.

Bringing in professionals in artistic and STEM-related fields is something that's possible so students can see how what they're learning can relate **to** their futures.

Miller noted that the **STEAM** idea was not a directive.

"We're always **looking to** give our kids the very best that we can give them so they can compete with the top of the top," Miller said.

and the desires that they have.”

She added that when teachers offered hands-on application, the excitement and engagement were at their highest.

Initially, Anderson said Hays will offer a section each day of **STEAM** where students will problem solve, create solutions, collaborate with each other and learn that failure is a step on the journey **to** success. She expects that in three years or sooner, it will be integrated into the entire day.

“When you build that mindset in a kid, it’s much less likely **to** deter them from creative exploration and risk,” Anderson said.

She added that she thinks some teachers will move more quickly than others toward **STEAM** and some students will acclimate faster.

“I think that once they start and see enthusiasm in the kids, it’s just going **to** naturally happen. I wouldn’t be surprised if it happens quicker,” Anderson said.

Lee, in her fourth year as principal at **Alamo**, said changing **to STEAM** initially was a way **to** increase enrollment. The campus currently has 378 students in prekindergarten through fifth grade and 26 classroom teachers.

The school began **looking** at magnet focuses, including STEM – science, technology, engineering and math without the art component, and **STEAM**.

“We actually visited a school in Burleson, Texas. Then the shift really changed **to** wanting phenomenal experiences for students. We got **to** see how the kiddoes were collaborating and sharing and it was hands-on. The discussions in the class were just amazing that kids were having from kinder **to** fifth grade,” Lee said.

At first, Lee said teacher training will focus on infusing **STEAM** with the existing curriculum. It will be called Four C Training. The four Cs are collaboration, communication, critical thinking and creativity.

“It’s for the teachers **to** take back **to** the kiddoes,” Lee said. “... There’s accountability in all the **STEAM** components. ...” She noted that her campus is not just going **to** focus on **STEAM** for an hour or two a day.

“We are going **to** dedicate time during the day for it. I don’t want it **to** turn into an after-school program. ...

Like Miller at Gale Pond **Alamo**, Hays teachers Amanda Webber and Lydia Ybarra are excited about the **STEAM conversion**. Webber teaches fifth grade and just finished her eighth year at Hays and Ybarra teaches fourth grade and has six years of service.

“I got **to** visit a couple of other campuses across Texas that are using it **to** see the way the students are engaged,” Webber said. “I’m excited about it and the connections they’re making with the community for their projects ... it’s taking their learning **to** the real world. ... We’ve been doing little pieces of it throughout my years at **Hays**, and now just **to** be able **to** make that our focus and make it a big part of our student learning is really exciting.”

Ybarra said she feels **STEAM** is going **to** have a positive influence on their students’ learning.

“I think that by working with projects they’re just going **to** be able **to** shine and truly show what they’re learning. They’re going **to** be accountable for their learning,” she said.

Webber said another big part of **STEAM** is students learning about failure and not giving up. She noted that the teachers and students will be learning together.

“I’m excited about it, but also a little anxious because I know I’m going **to** mess up, as well, but that’s part of the process. ... It’s a growing point; a place **to** say what worked; what didn’t; what can I fix?” Webber said.

Ybarra said she thinks the students are ready for the challenge of **STEAM**.

PICK Education, a venture through ECISD Chief Innovation Officer Jason Osborne, also ties in with the **STEAM conversion**.



**Regina Lee is principal** at Gale Pond **Alamo** Elementary.

**MARK STERKELI** ODESSA AMERICAN

We want the **STEAM** activities right alongside their traditional curriculum. ...,” Lee said.



Lee added that she and Anderson submitted their proposals around the same time and are collaborating on the **conversion**

**AMY ANDERSON**

**PRINCIPAL OF HAYS ELEMENTARY**

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