



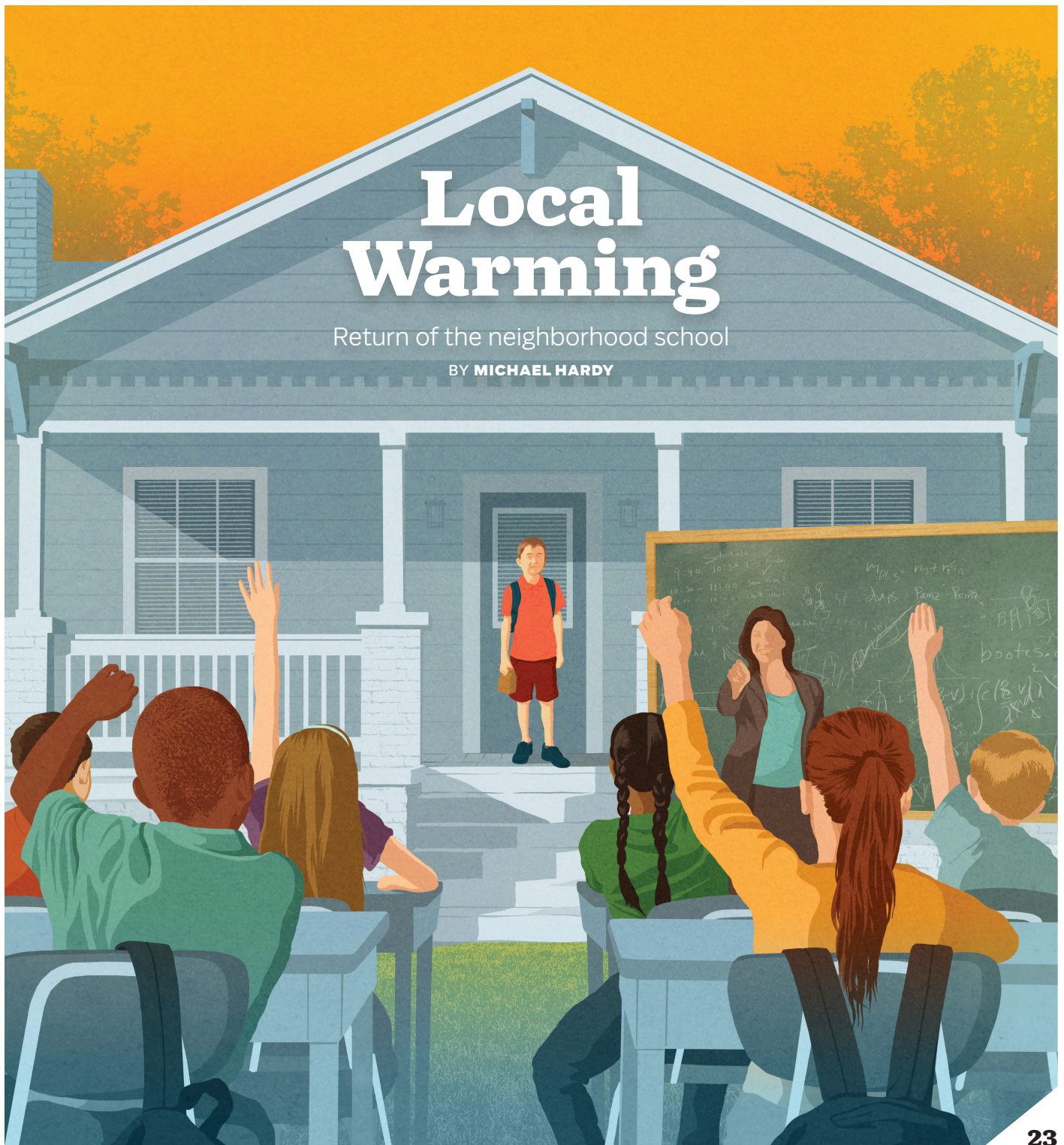
ICE HOUSE

Everybody over to the picnic table, it's time to shoot some bull.

Local Warming

Return of the neighborhood school

BY MICHAEL HARDY





HOGG MIDDLE SCHOOL occupies a stately red-brick edifice embellished with fanciful Romanesque touches: ornamental friezes, balustraded towers, arched doorways flanked by fluted Doric columns, and an entablature above the grand entrance portal inscribed with the name of its dedicatee, James S. Hogg, the first native-born Texas governor, whose family

donated the land on which the school was built in 1926. Situated on a quietly prosperous residential street in Woodland Heights, Hogg looks like the kind of school parents might walk their children to in a Norman Rockwell painting.

But most Woodland Heights parents *don't* walk their children to Hogg, and haven't in decades. Instead, once the children have graduated from elementary school, parents drive them to public schools in other neighborhoods—HISD allows school choice—enroll them in private schools, or, sometimes, decamp to the suburbs. The students who do attend Hogg offer a stark demographic contrast to the neighborhood residents—during the 2011-12 school year, 90 percent of Hogg's approximately 700 students were Hispanic, 5 percent were black, and 3 percent were white. Nearly all the students qualified for free or reduced-price school lunches and over half were considered "at-risk." This in a neighborhood where the median appraised home price is upwards of \$400,000. Perhaps unsurprisingly given its underprivileged student population, Hogg tests well below the state average on standardized tests.

A few years ago, Woodland Heights resident Emily Guyre and her husband, whose two children attend nearby Travis Elementary, decided they wanted to send them to Hogg after fifth grade. The Guyre children love Travis, and she and her husband love walking them to school. "At Travis and at Harvard [Elementary School], the administration is top-notch, you've got a ton of community support, the faculty is amazing, the kids work hard," Guyre told us recently. "And by fifth grade, that all goes away, and they go out of the neighborhood. It just didn't make sense to me—I was like, this is ridiculous."

And so, with the support of Hogg's dynamic new principal, Mina Schnitta, EdD, Guyre and seven other like-minded parents founded the non-profit group Learn Local, intended to build a bridge between the Heights's two most successful elementary schools, Harvard and Travis, and the school they fed into, Hogg. (Nine elementary schools in total are zoned to Hogg.) But first, Guyre, the group's director, knew that Learn Local had to help transform Hogg into a school where parents would want to send their kids. Despite the school's well-regarded STEM magnet program, it seemed a formidable challenge.

"There were rumors about safety," Guyre said. "Before Dr. Schnitta got there in 2011, there were 16-year-old kids on campus. There were gang issues on campus. Some of the teachers probably didn't need to be in the classroom."

Under the new principal's leadership, things slowly began to improve. Schnitta got rid of the deadwood and brought in younger, more energetic educators. Hogg adopted the rigorous International Baccalaureate curriculum. And Schnitta cultivated a new sense of discipline and respect among the formerly rowdy students. "I told kids that school is their job," Schnitta remem-

bered. "They need to be on time and look good—shirts tucked in."

Hogg's tally of disciplinary infractions is now among the lowest of any HISD middle school, according to Schnitta. "You used to see fights outside of the school, you used to see kids just wandering around in the school," said Blanca Alcocer, whose daughter graduated from Hogg a few years ago and whose son goes there now. "Now it's just a different story—I haven't seen a fight outside the school since my daughter was in seventh grade. Like any school, we still have children who get in trouble, but it's a big change with [Schnitta]."

But with schools, as with so much else, perceptions can be hard to change. As a way of publicizing the new Hogg, Learn Local board members hosted mixers where neighborhood parents could meet Schnitta face-to-face; they gave tours of the school; they organized events at Hogg for students from Harvard and Travis. "It wasn't just the parents—the kids were also hearing bad rumors about Hogg," Guyre said. "So if you hear from your peers that 'Oh, that's a bad school, why would you go there?,' that's a big part of the problem." The results of Learn Local's publicity campaign are beginning to show. This fall, Harvard and Travis are sending almost 50 percent more students to Hogg than last year.

Isabella DiFilippo, a Hogg eighth-grader who transferred from a private Montessori school midway through the 2013-2014 school year, was an early convert. Although her parents John and Arianna are board members of Learn Local, the idea of transferring to Hogg came from Isabella herself after a long conversation with Schnitta at one of the neighborhood mixers.

Asked whether he had been nervous about sending his daughter to a school that carried a bad reputation for so long, John DiFilippo didn't hesitate. "Absolutely not," he told us. "Obviously, any parent, no matter where you're sending your kid, you're aware of positives and negatives. But by the time we made the decision it seemed absolutely obvious to all of us, including Isabella. Everything that we saw [at Hogg] was positive." Isabella's younger brother Marco is scheduled to start sixth grade at Hogg this fall, and the DiFilippos look forward to walking both their children to school. And after graduation from Hogg, they hope Isabella and Marco will continue on to Reagan High School, another historically underperforming Heights school in the midst of a turnaround.

According to Gary Orfield, the co-director of UCLA's Civil Rights Project, gentrifying neighborhoods like the Heights, the East End, and Midtown provide fertile ground for the kinds of schools envisioned in the wake of *Brown vs. Board of Education*, which recently marked its 60th anniversary. "We have neighborhoods that are attracting middle-class, highly educated families back into the city—not just white families but other families that want to live in the city," Orfield said. "And it gives the opportunity to have the kind of schools that inner cities haven't had for a long time, where there really would be racial and class diversity."

Alcocer, who lives in the Greater Heights neighborhood of Brooke Smith, said Hogg will benefit from having more neighborhood students. "We have a lot of children who come to Hogg from other zones," she told us. "And that's not bad, it's just that parents aren't too involved. If you live 25 minutes away and you work all day, you don't want to deal with traffic to come to a school fundraiser." Attracting a more diverse range of students would also be a boon, she added: "When my daughter went to Hogg there were no Asian kids. There were a few white kids. It was pretty much Hispanics and African Americans. And that's fine—we're Hispanic. But I like my children to meet children from other backgrounds."

Despite its initial successes, Learn Local isn't resting on its laurels. This fall, thanks in part to the group's efforts, Hogg is adding programs in wrestling and squash, and Guyre and company would like to start an orchestra program.

"I just want it to be a school that people feel comfortable going to—that's their school, because that's their neighborhood," Guyre said. "My hope is that someone, someday, will call up a real estate agent and say, 'I want to buy a home that's zoned to Hogg.'" —Michael Hardy



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