



# PRESENTS THE TEACHER OF THE MONTH



## Joni Mendez

Herfurth Elementary

### Rowlett teacher helps bilingual students overcome language barrier

Results of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) reading test, taken earlier this month, were recently released. Overall, approximately 91 percent of Texas third-graders passed the reading section, with 82 percent of limited-English proficient students passing.

Although those results are better than in 2003, they can't match the success achieved by the students of Joni Mendez, a bilingual education teacher at Herfurth Elementary School in Rowlett. One-hundred percent of her 19 students passed the TAKS, with nine of them taking the test in English and 10 in Spanish.

"We're still celebrating," says Ms. Mendez, whose class achieved the results in her first year at Herfurth.

Having an entire group of students pass the examination may not seem like such a big deal, unless you consider that many of her students came to the U.S. a short time ago, and spoke very little English when they began the current school year. In fact, one child didn't know a word of English when she arrived at Herfurth four months ago.

"I tried to get her caught up academically in her own language while getting a grasp of English," Ms. Mendez says. When the girl began, "she was barely reading and couldn't write. Now she's doing very well. She's very smart."

Ms. Mendez has spent all of her 14 teaching years as a bilingual education instructor, and she also has taught English as

a Second Language (ESL) to children and adults during summers and in the evenings. The Victoria native graduated with a business degree from Cumberland College in Williamsburg, Ky. After further studies at Texas A&M University-Commerce, where she earned her teaching degree, Ms. Mendez taught in Costa Rica and Bolivia. After moving to North Texas 11 years ago, she taught at Southgate and Caldwell elementary schools in Garland before transferring to Herfurth last year.

Caldwell's former principal, Debra Kneggs, also made the move to Herfurth. She says that Ms. Mendez "is the type of teacher that treats the kids like her own. She goes above and beyond and puts everything she has [into her teaching]. She has high expectations for all of her kids, and they work hard for her."

Ms. Kneggs describes Ms. Mendez as an "overachiever," because she also works with her students' parents, offering parenting skills and other advice.

Married and the mother of four children, Ms. Mendez knows the importance of making the learning experience fun. Active learning, including participating in hands-on activities such as games, acting, creating sets and cooking, provides concepts that stay with the students.

"I love the children," Ms. Mendez says. "I think they need teachers who are positive."

"The greatest gift I can give kids who come to this country is [knowledge] of the English language and a good education."



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