



S-T Photo by Sandy Billingsley

Big Bend High School seniors Stephen Wormington (left), Eliseo Amaro and Devin Hickie take their final English exam at Big Bend High School. They are in the first class to attend high school all four years in Terlingua.

'Long journey' ended 4 years ago for students at Big Bend

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TERLINGUA - When Big Bend High School seniors collect their diplomas tonight, it will be a celebration of the long journey they didn't have to make.

Unlike previous high school students from this small community just 17 miles from the border, the class of 2000, which entered a new high school as freshmen in 1996, never had to take the daily 200-mile round trip to Alpine.

"If it hadn't been for this

ities and probably wouldn't have made the grade," valedictorian Kade Killingsworth said.

Kade Killingsworth and 14 other classmates are members of a school where the dropout rate is less than 2 percent.

Just five years ago - when attending high school required a bus ride to Alpine - the dropout rate for students from the area was more than 60 percent.

This year, more than one-half of the graduating seniors are going on to technical school or a four-year college. Technical

school is awaiting seven of the students, while two will be attending the University of Texas Permian Basin and one has been accepted to Angelo State University.

"Between 1987 and 1996, only five students went on to college," said Kathy Killingsworth, BBHS superintendent and Kade's mother.

Options in the past for the students were to ride the bus, move to another city or stay with relatives in Alpine.

"Some just chose not to do it. Before the school was built, we had 20 students. Now we have 58 students," Kathy Killingsworth said.

Prior to 1996, the students met the bus at Terlingua Elementary School at 6:30 a.m., drove 80 miles to Alpine, spent the day in school, then returned to Terlingua at about 6 p.m.

"It was a 12-hour day," she said. "Some of these students had to drive from (Big Bend National Park) which is 30 miles away. So, some of them had 110-mile drives just to get to school. In all, they would spend about four hours a day driving."

Kathy Killingsworth said she tried to take the bus to Alpine to attend teacher certification classes at Sul Ross State University.

"But that only lasted one time," she said. "Once was enough, I drove after that. Taking the bus just wasn't an equal access education for the kids."

Having a high school of their own has changed everything, she said.

"We have a school now where the kids are actively involved," Kathy Killingsworth said. "They can also have part-time jobs and can have a real life in high school."

Five years ago, the students didn't participate in sports or UIL academics, because they'd have to catch the bus immediately after

Gina Lujan, whose older brother rode the bus, said school was easier for her because she had more time after school.

"It was harder for him because there were no after school activities, and they weren't as close to their teachers," she said. "Here, you know who your teachers are. You see them after school."

Now, the students are taking part in one-act play, cross country and have gone to region in golf, track and UIL academics. They even have time to play basketball, although not UIL yet, with other neighboring districts.

"Each year, more programs are added for the kids," Kathy Killingsworth said.

During this academic school year, band and track were added. Almost half of the high school students participate in band.

"Before we had band, many of the students hadn't ever seen a musical instrument before," she said.

Tonight, the band will play before graduation.

Those experiences were lost to those students before the school was built. Another lost opportunity was the inability to mine the local communities for further academic endeavors.

"We are top heavy in education around here," Kathy Killingsworth said.

Terlingua, Study Butte and Lajitas has much to offer the students, she said. Within those communities are artists, naturalists, many retired professors and other professionals as well as park personnel.

The curriculum now offers, on a part-time basis, computer science, meteorology, geology and photography as well as the required curriculum of reading, writing and arithmetic on a full-time basis.

The stigma of being an "out of town" student also is gone. This is the first graduating class who never had to lug their pillows on the bus nor be referred to as "down south kids."

Each year, the future brightens for the next graduating class because the citizens in the Terlingua Common School District and San Vicente Independent School District raised \$650,000 to build a school for their children.

They are now working hard at building a first-class library for the school and for the community.

Currently, they are \$34,000 shy of reaching their \$300,000 goal.

"Once we get the library built, we'll have adult education, English as a second language, long-distance learning that offers college courses and GED preparation," Kathy Killingsworth said.

The library will be instrumental in helping some of those former students who didn't graduate in the past because of the long bus ride, she said.

"This will give them the opportunity to finish up what they started," Kathy Killingsworth said. "If an adult wants a book, they have to drive 80 miles to Alpine (now)."

The library, which comes in Phase II of the building project, will be followed by a cafeteria.

The superintendent probably is not planning to build a bus barn until the students begin to participate in more UIL competitions.

"We have no need for buses. We've done our time on them," she said.