

School district boundary markers at Woodlake Parkway & Bridgewater Parkway  
photos by Chris Fritchie



# SCHOOL DISTRICTING & ZONING: WHAT'S IT ALL ABOUT?

BY SUSAN MARDELE



**WITH THE EXTRAORDINARY** growth Frisco has experienced in the last few years, it's not surprising that Frisco Independent School District (FISD) has experienced – and continues to experience – change. The drawing and redrawing of school zones within the district has become a yearly occurrence, and because school districts do not precisely follow community boundaries, the boundaries between school districts have come into question for some residents. If your family is impacted by a zoning change or district boundary challenge, the process of creating, adjusting and modifying school zones and districts can seem mysterious. However, there is a system, a science and something of an art to the process. And, while not everyone is always happy with the changes, FISD takes great pains to inform families, make the process as smooth as possible and keep a positive attitude about change.

## A POCKET HISTORY OF FRISCO ISD

FISD's history began before the town of Frisco existed. In 1876, the Bass School began serving area students. It was named for teacher Marinda Bass' family on whose land it was built. The school burned in 1878 and was rebuilt. After six years, the school moved to James Howard's land and became the Howard School. Lebanon School, Erudia School, Robertson School, Robinson School and the Hamilton School also served students within the district. When Frisco began to emerge in 1902, the school district also adopted the name.

The FISD has come a long way since then. As of March 2008, the district serves 27,634 students with the 2008-2009 school year accommodating 27 elementary schools, nine middle schools, four high schools and two

special program schools. It is the fifth largest employer in Collin County with 3,700 employees; 1,900 of the total are teachers and twenty percent of those have advanced degrees. FISD's 160 buses travel 1,580,371 miles each year, transport students on 3,898 field trips and use 187,258 gallons of diesel fuel annually. The Child Nutrition Department is self-supporting and serves 1.3 million lunches yearly.

## SCHOOL DISTRICTS CROSS COMMUNITY BOUNDARIES

School district boundaries were originally established by the state many years ago, before some of today's communities existed. When communities grew and boundaries changed, school districts stayed the same. Thus, only 70 percent of FISD students live in Frisco; the rest live in Plano, McKinney and Little Elm. Lewisville Independent School District (LISD) serves 12 communities – including some students who are Frisco residents.



School district boundary marker

photo by Chris Fritchie

The Plano and Richardson Independent School Districts also cross community boundaries.

## REDRAWING SCHOOL DISTRICTS

While rezoning within a district is a yearly, flexible process, the exercise of redrawing a boundary between school districts is definitely not. It is a process regulated by Texas state law but usually accomplished locally and can be lengthy, expensive, time consuming and may not result in success. According to Debbie Ratliff at the Texas Education Agency, the only time the state gets involved is if it is forcing one district to join another, as in the case of the Wilmer Hutchins School District.

For example, 2.4 square miles of the city of Frisco is in Denton County and falls in the Lewisville Independent School District (LISD). Many residents of this area would prefer to have their children attend FISD schools. Children in grades K-5 go to LISD's Tom Hicks

Elementary, which is close by, but for middle and high school, children are bused to Carrollton to attend Arbor Creek Middle School and Hebron High School in Carrollton. The distance is certainly an issue; the children get on the bus at 7:30 a.m. and don't return until around 5:00 p.m. But the issues that concern the families go deeper than that.

Dudley Wilson, a homeowner in Heritage Lakes, is heading the resident initiative to redistrict the area. The group has established a website at [www.wearefrisco.org](http://www.wearefrisco.org). He says, "Our kids are completely disenfranchised from the community. In 6<sup>th</sup> grade, my son who is now a junior in high school played football in the Frisco Football League. The team he played with went on to win the city championship. He's never seen one of those children since. That should be a lifelong experience."

Mr. Wilson goes on, "I have talked personally to numerous parents who have moved when their kids got to fifth grade specifically to avoid that situation. The numbers from LISD bear that out." In the numbers Mr. Wilson obtained from LISD, approximately 60 children from the area are enrolled at Tom Hicks Elementary per grade level. In middle school the figure drops to 31 and in high school to 20. "There are houses for sale in all the affected neighborhoods every year when school lets out. That's the fifth graders' parents leaving. There were at least three in my neighborhood this year," says Mr. Wilson.

The group has collected 2,000 signed petitions from the registered voters in the area who support the redistricting effort, and that meets the legal criteria of support from a majority of the 2,990 residents, but that's just one small step in a very long and involved process. The homeowners are in it for the long haul,



Students ready for class  
photo by Chris Fritchie

though, and don't plan to take "no" for an answer. "It's about the kids," says Mr. Wilson. "We need to show them an example. The example is to be civil and use the process. And there's more than one process. There are the courts, there's the school system and there's the political system. At the end of the day if we've tried all those processes – and fast forward five years from now, I believe we are going to be successful – but if we're not, I can at least look at my kids and say we did everything we could."

### THE REDISTRICTING PROCESS

Redistricting involves more than just where a child goes to school. It involves school assets and liabilities. If the Denton County section of Frisco became part of Fisd, Tom Hicks Elementary would also become part of Fisd. In that case, Fisd would have to absorb the cost of the school and any liabilities associated with it. There is also the issue of taxes. Right now, the taxable value of the businesses and homes in the area are part of LISD's overall taxable value. The tax rate when applied to that value goes to LISD. If the area were annexed into Fisd, then the tax revenue based on that taxable value would go to Fisd.

The area in question is an L-shaped section of Frisco bordered by SH121 on the south, The Colony on the west and wrapping around the northern border of The Colony. The east border is the Denton County/Collin County line. The northern border is a line that runs along Lebanon Road at the point where it is directly east/west and stops just past Main Street in Lewisville. (See map on page 57 for details.)

There are many steps for changing a district boundary. They are summarized from the Texas Education Code – the state law governing public schools – Section 13.051, titled Detachment and Annexation of Territory in the box on page 52.

A petition giving the metes and bounds of the territory and requesting

detachment and annexation is signed by a majority of registered voters residing in the territory or a majority of the surface owners of taxable property in the territory.

The petition is delivered to the boards of trustees of each affected territory. Immediately following receipt of the petition, each board of trustees gives notice of the contemplated change by publishing and posting a notice as if for an election. The notice must specify the place and date for a hearing on the matter and the places and dates must be different for each district.

At the hearing, each board of trustees considers the educational interests of current and future students, and the other social, economic and educational effects of the proposed boundary change. Based on those findings, they approve or disapprove the petition. To pass, the proposed annexation must be approved by a majority of the boards of trustees from each affected district. The results must be reported to the Commissioners Courts of both counties.

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If the result is an approval, the Commissioners Court redefines the district boundaries. If the result is a disapproval by both boards of trustees, the decision may not be appealed. If the result is a disapproval by only one board of trustees, the decision may be appealed to the Commissioners Court by either territory. The Commissioners Court considers all impacts and makes a final decision.

School district boundaries are not easily changed. However, zoning within a school district is flexible according to the needs of the district, subject to input from the community and a final decision by the school board.

## Contact Your School District

Celina Independent School District  
P.O. Box 188, Celina  
972.382.2751  
www.celinaisd.com

Frisco Independent School District  
6942 Maple, Frisco  
469.633.6000  
www.frisocisd.org

Lewisville Independent School District  
1800 Timbercreek Rd., Lewisville  
972.539.1551  
www.lisd.net

Little Elm Independent School District  
500 Lobo Lane, Little Elm  
972.292.1847  
www.leisd.ws

McKinney Independent School District  
#1 Duvall St., McKinney  
469.742.4000  
www.mckinneyisd.net

Plano Independent School District  
2700 W. 15th St., Plano  
469.752.8100  
www.planoisd.edu

Prosper Independent School District  
605 E. 7th St., Prosper  
972.346.3316  
www.prosper-isd.net



## FISD Rezoning Process

### SEPTEMBER:

Receive actual population and projections from FISD demographer.

### OCTOBER:

Announce the rezoning plan. Publish it on the district website and in the local newspaper.

### NOVEMBER:

Present options at the school board meeting and have open discussion. If the situation is clear-cut, present a “preferred plan.”

### DECEMBER:

At the board meeting, hear parent input on the agenda item created for that purpose. Solicit and collect letters, email and phone input on zoning changes and review.

### JANUARY:

The School Board makes the final zoning decision considering all input and publishes the decision to everyone affected. The decision date is flexible if there is an issue that requires more time.

### FRISCO'S GROWTH HAS CAUSED REZONING

In a high-growth area like Frisco, the district has to add schools on a regular basis to relieve overcrowding in existing schools and accommodate students from new communities as they are built. For example, FISD elementary schools are built for 700-750 students. When it appears the population will soon reach 850, the district takes action. That usually means either adding a school or redrawing boundaries to move some students to a less populated school.

Take The Trails at Frisco for example. “Fisher Elementary serves The Trails,” says Dr. Reedy, superintendent of schools for FISD. “There was so much growth out there we just couldn’t do it, so we had to build Corbell Elementary to pick up the western part of The Trails or we would have had 1,000 students at an elementary school built for 720. Most of The Trails goes to Fisher, but we had to bring some other subdivisions in to join the western part of The Trails at Corbell.”

### FISD'S YEARLY REZONING PROCESS

Fifteen years ago when Dr. Reedy came to FISD as assistant superintendent, he

researched rezoning methods. “There were as many ways of rezoning as there were school districts,” he says. “The first thing we did was set our grade configuration. We wanted kindergarten through fifth for elementary school, grades six to eight for middle school and grades nine to 12 for high school. Then we set what we wanted for optimum enrollment on all of those levels. I worked with some of the other administrators to determine the principles of rezoning. The process we use, we have not wavered on because we think it allows for maximum input each year.”

Delays in the final zoning decision are rare, but it does happen. Dr. Reedy states, “Only once have they not made a final decision in January. We got enough input from the parents at Riddle Elementary two or three years ago about the zoning at Fowler Middle School that we decided to change our minds and delay the decision a month to make provision for that input. We didn’t make the final decision until February.”

The typical process takes three to four months to complete, and the district receives about 20-50 parent responses, usually about a family or transportation issue and most of them are negative.

“I’ll have to hand it to our parents and our students, though,” says Dr. Reedy. “They’ve been amazingly resilient with whatever we’ve done and everything’s worked well. The kids achieve at a very high level on the new campuses as well as on the existing campuses.”

### FRISCO REZONING PRINCIPLES

In 1993 and 1994 when it appeared that FUSD would be involved in rezoning every year, the district established a set of principles to consider to govern the process. According to Dr. Reedy, all are of equal importance.

Optimum use of space – “We want the best possible situation for every child we have,” says Dr. Reedy. “Sometimes we disagree about what that is because we – the administration and board – also have the responsibility of leveraging taxpayer dollars to the optimum, to the best of our ability. Parents, even though they’re taxpayers, have to worry about that less than we do.”

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Minimize busing – Minimizing bus time makes the school day less complicated for the child and therefore makes learning easier. It’s less demanding for families because children don’t have to get up as early in the morning. Minimizing bus travel also saves taxpayers money, utilizing less fuel and fewer driver hours.

Heterogeneity – Frisco prefers diverse campuses, including racial and socio-economic diversity. Every effort is made to distribute population to support this

principle if it does not abridge the other principles. The population of the school district is 63 percent white, 14 percent Hispanic, 12 percent African American, 11 percent Asian/Pacific Islander and less than one percent Native American or Alaskan Native.

Proximity to campus – The child's proximity to the campus is taken into account. This principle fits closely with the busing minimization principle.

Unity – When FISD opened its first school in the city of Plano, this principle was added to the earlier four. Dr. Reedy states, "Some people were saying, 'When we rezone, let's make sure all those kids are from Plano. We've got a natural boundary there separating the city of Frisco from the city of Plano.' We said, why? They're all Frisco ISD kids. Why would we want to do that? That's unity. We don't care what town or city they come from."



FISD has guidelines on "intra-district transfers" between schools. If the parents want the child to attend a different school, the transfer will usually be granted.

Unity also means trying to keep neighborhoods or subdivisions together if possible. FISD prefers not to split a major subdivision down the middle for an elementary school. Children from the subdivisions have been going to school together for a long time and the district tries to keep them together.

Plantation Resort is a good example. Students from that development have gone to school together since Curtsinger

Elementary opened in 1995. Dr. Reedy says that to foster unity the school district will stretch a little to keep a development together. "We have to have a significant reason to break up a subdivision like that. The most significant reason, of course, would be persistent overcrowding. They're slightly above the enrollment peak we like to have for elementary schools, but they're only slightly above it, and they've stabilized where enrollment hasn't gone up in some time."

In other cases, FISD has not been able to stretch far enough to keep a subdivision together. Take for example the Trails at Frisco, mentioned a few paragraphs above. Another example is the Grayhawk subdivision, at one time completely served by Boals Elementary. Enrollment was such that the school couldn't continue to support the whole community, so FISD opened Robertson Elementary in Little Elm. The northern part of Grayhawk now attends Robertson Elementary.

#### TRANSFERS MAKE ZONING FLEXIBLE

By necessity, FISD's focus is on the smooth functioning of the whole school system. For that reason, adjusting a school zone for issues that affect one or two families is not possible. What might be good for one family might not be good for another. But FISD offers flexibility so families can have their needs met. "What we try to do is make rezoning less of a problem through our transfer procedures," says Dr. Reedy. "We have a lot of flex in transfer procedures for our elementary and middle schools. We don't allow transfers at the high school level because eligibility issues can come into play with University Interscholastic League (UIL) competition."

FISD has guidelines on "intra-district transfers" between elementary and middle schools within the district. If the parents want the child to attend a different school, the transfer will usually be granted if the family provides transportation. The number one restriction is that FISD will not transfer

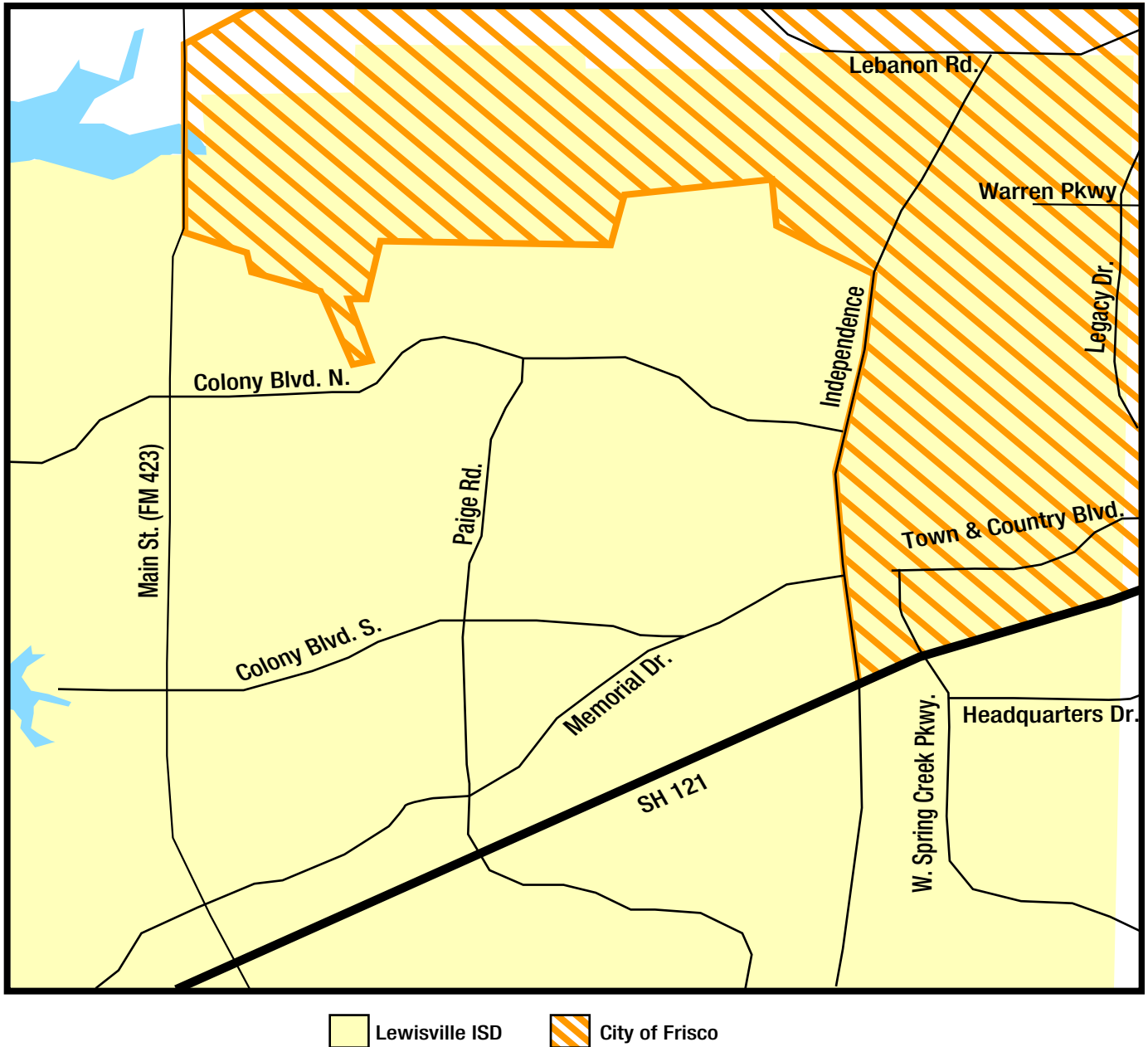
a child to a school at greater than 90 percent of capacity. “We approve the transfers because we want the kids to go wherever they want to go within the district. If you ask to transfer into an overcrowded school, though, we’re going to turn you down,” says Dr. Reedy.

### BUSING

One consideration in the school rezoning process is busing. “We try to rezone to minimize that,” says Dr. Reedy. “Overall, in the district, we’ve built so many schools over the years that children who are bused are not bused as far as they used to be. When we had one high school, a lot of kids had to be bused from long distances. Now that we have four high schools and we’re building numbers five and six, they’re closer. Same with the elementary schools and middle schools.” FISD follows state guidelines on busing. A student who lives within two miles of the school is not eligible for busing.

The attitudes that parents adopt can make a tremendous difference in how children cope with change.

There are national laws that require busing for desegregation, but because of the racial makeup of the district, FISD is not affected by those laws. “In certain urban areas and even in suburban areas that have high percentages of minority students, then yes, there are some zoning issues that we would need to follow,” says Dr. Reedy. “That does not affect Frisco ISD. Our percentages are such that it’s not an issue in our district. However, we believe that a culturally diverse campus is preferable, so we do whatever we can without abridging the other principles of rezoning to make sure we have as much



diversity as possible on our campuses.”

**COUNT ON CHANGE**

If there is one thing that is certain, it is that FIRD will continue to change as Frisco grows. While FIRD families often can't control those changes, they can control how they manage them. The attitudes that parents adopt can make a tremendous difference in how children cope with change. "In this world we live in today, change is inevitable. If the parent is positive about the change – 'Oh, look at this nice new school; it's closer to our neighborhood,' the child will be positive about it as well," says Dr. Reedy.

There are a lot of reasons to be

positive about a school zoning change. FIRD strives for uniform excellence in all schools to provide the best education possible for every child. The same FIRD quality standards apply at a new school as apply at existing schools. The quality of leadership and teachers is equivalent at the new school. FIRD's curriculum and instruction department and forward planning ensure uniformity of quality education throughout the district. "In Frisco, we have a lot of new parents all the time who are not familiar with the fact that we've been doing this for a long time without any drop-off in educational attainment, so one of our jobs is to re-educate people all the time and say, 'A

change of schools isn't a negative thing for your child,'" says Dr. Reedy.

Four factors make the move easier for a child. First, rezoning typically moves a child closer to home rather than farther away. Second, the child is not rezoned alone. A lot of friends and neighbors will be part of the rezoning as well. It's not likely a child will be rezoned and not know anyone in the new school. Third, many of the teachers from the previous school will be transferred to the new school because enrollment will decrease at the overcrowded school. Often, the assistant principal from the previous school will become principal at the new school. Fourth, FIRD utilizes a

standardized floor plan for its schools, so if a child is familiar a previous school, the new layout will be just about the same.

### WILL EVERYONE BE HAPPY?

FISD puts out a 10-point bulletin in October before starting the rezoning process. Question number 10 is, “Will everyone be happy with rezoning?” “The answer is that not everyone will be happy because it involves very emotional issues about children and where they go to school,” says Dr. Reedy. “We know that going in. We’re not going to have a 100 percent happy district.”

In decisions about rezoning, FISD follows the district’s principles of zoning. The principles are also a handy tool for explaining changes to parents. If the complaint is that the child will now be going farther from home, it may be that a decision any other way violated the other rezoning principles.

“When you take the time to sit down and show parents, they understand,” says Dr. Reedy. “It’s just a matter of having a team that takes time and is sympathetic. Most of the input we get

is not in the form of complaints. It’s in the form of questions and clarifications. All the people we’ve worked with have been polite and well-prepared. It’s been an orderly, professional process and we’re pleased to say that we have the greatest parents to work with that you can imagine. It’s obvious they would be concerned and have questions.”

In a district the size of FISD, and with the amount of growth Frisco has experienced, saying that yearly rezoning has gone smoothly is quite a statement. It says something not only about the parents, as Dr. Reedy points out, but also about the school district. Planning ahead, setting governance principles that give shape to the process and balancing factors affecting students with business concerns of the district is not an easy job. The district has done a lot of things right and kept at the forefront the most important factor – providing a quality education for the children of FISD.

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*Susan Mardele is a freelance writer living in Princeton. Website references are also listed on page 84.*



*Frisco school bus  
photo by Chris Fritchie*

