Principal ready to change perception

New goal for Lee High is to have a 90 percent graduation rate in three years

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About 600 new students recently entered ninth grade at Lee High School, joining the more than 250 students who did not have enough credits to advance to the tenth grade.

It is Xochitl (pronounced Soche) Rodriguez-Davila’s task to get those would-be tenth graders up to speed on their credits so they can join their peers as soon as possible.

That is just one issue the energetic new principal of the west Houston school, 6529 Beverly Hill, has to address in order to boost graduation rates and improve student achievement as part of Houston ISD’s massive effort to turn around low-performing schools such as Lee High School.

Since her hasty hiring in early June, Rodriguez-Davila has overseen a campus facelift, helped comb through every student’s transcript to identify areas of need, brought in new administrators and replaced about a third of the teachers.

In an effort to create a positive, college-bound culture she has instituted separate areas of learning for each grade, including a senior wing, complete with a college center, and put up college pennants in the hallways.

“The challenge really is to change the culture at Lee and the perception of what Lee is to the public,” Rodriguez-Davila said. “My job is to provide quality education in which students can make a decision and get the opportunities they deserve. I want to say to students, ‘we are going to prepare you for college.’”

Rodriguez-Davila was completing her first year as principal of Jackson Middle School, 5100 Polk St., when she was called to take on Lee in the wake of former principal Paul Castro’s departure, after only six months on the job, to KIPP charter schools. Castro had replaced long-time principal Steve Amstutz in January.

Under Rodriguez-Davila’s short tenure at Jackson, student test results improved greatly, as had the school climate. It was that can-do approach district administrators were looking for in a leader for Lee, one of the Apollo 20 “priority” schools in the district.

“Xochitl looks at what she has and gets really high results in achievement,” said Jeremy Beard, the district’s newly installed school improvement officer for Apollo 20 schools. “She is very strategic about motivating students and people. She demonstrated that at Jackson.”

A slight woman, who looks younger than her 38 years, Rodriguez-Davila has an air of urgency.

She has put in place a team of administrators, most of them newly hired, to help.

She said their enthusiasm, varied backgrounds — one speaks Urdu and Arabic, another speaks Spanish and another has a special education background — and skill set will serve the largely low-income, immigrant population well.

As well as the additional school days, longer hours and extra tutoring that are part of any Apollo 20 school, Rodriguez-Davila was looking at evening and weekend classes to accommodate students’ needs.

“We are looking at being creative this year to really meet the needs of the kids,” she said.

She also was planning to add extracurricular activities, such as debate and junior varsity football, and was looking at beefing up the once thriving magnet humanities program to develop a richer environment.