EMPOWERING HEARTS AND MINDS:
LESSONS LEARNED from the EARLY COLLEGE EXPANSION PARTNERSHIP in the RIO GRANDE VALLEY
The Early College Expansion Partnership (ECEP) was made possible by strong partnerships among Jobs for the Future (JFF), Educate Texas, Denver Public Schools, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District (PSJA) and Brownsville Independent School District (BISD). Support for this ambitious project was provided by the U.S. Department of Education Investing in Innovation Fund, with matching support from the AT&T Foundation, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the W.W Caruth, Jr. Foundation, the Community College of Aurora Foundation, Denver Public Schools Foundation, Emily Griffith Foundation and the Timothy & Bernadette Marquez Foundation.

This report captures points of success and lessons learned throughout the process of school transformation in the Rio Grande Valley. Many educators, parents and students generously donated their time to share firsthand insights from the victories and challenges experienced throughout the expansion of early college in PSJA and BISD. Special thanks to the following individuals who contributed to this paper through keynote remarks, session presentations, recorded meetings, focus groups and individual interviews:

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- Victoria Barrios, David Garner, Jorge Mullena, & Nancy Vasquez, PSJA Memorial Early College High School Students
- Isabella Blanco, Petra Garcia, & Damian Luna, PSJA Early College High School Students
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- Dominique Caro-Garza, Counselor, PSJA Memorial Early College High School
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- Darcia Cuellar, Principal, PSJA College, Career & Technology Academy
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- Caroline Myers, Advanced Academics, Brownsville Independent School District
- Catherine Pena, Consultant, Educate Texas
- Leroy Perez, Teacher & Coach, PSJA Memorial Early College High School
- Epifania Pinales, Lead Teacher, Advanced Academic Services, Brownsville Independent School District
- Fabian Quintana, Teacher and Parent, PSJA Memorial Early College High School
- Dr. Shirley A. Reed, President, South Texas College
- Maria Reyna, Counselor, Stephen F. Austin Middle School
- Larissa Saenz, Principal, Stephen F. Austin Middle School
- Linda Uribe, Administrator for College Readiness, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District
- Joel Vargas, Vice President, School and Learning Designs, Jobs for the Future
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- Sandra Velarde, Teacher & ELA Coordinator, PSJA Memorial Early College High School
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EMPOWERING HEARTS AND MINDS
EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District and Brownsville Independent School District sought to improve secondary and higher education outcomes for students through a series of interventions implemented by Educate Texas and Jobs for the Future. This initiative was fueled by a federal Investing in Innovation (i3) grant, awarded to Jobs for the Future from 2012 to 2017. To maximize and disseminate the experiential knowledge that resulted from the Early College Expansion Partnership (ECEP), Educate Texas has curated the points of success, challenges and best practices discovered through this five-year journey. Key findings are summarized below.

POINTS OF SUCCESS

- Academic and affective supports ensured that students and families had access to the necessary resources for success from middle school through college.
- Deliberate partnerships among the districts, institutions of higher education, Educate Texas and Jobs for the Future were cultivated to pursue a unified vision through a collaborative process.
- Data and governance structures were refined and new structures were created to streamline knowledge management, establish effective communication practices and facilitate shared decision making.

CHALLENGES

- Turnover of key personnel during the project exposed the need for staffing redundancies, documentation of policy and practice and broad communication to prevent gaps in institutional knowledge.
- As greater numbers of students qualified and enrolled in college coursework, the districts were forced to design new avenues of distributive leadership to ensure that all students received quality academic and affective supports.
- Dual-enrollment courses are not all meaningfully connected to career exploration, preparation or training. Both districts are currently working to bridge this gap.

BEST PRACTICES AND RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make decisions based on what is most beneficial to students (rather than adults or institutions). Design comprehensive, student-centered systems and practices to propel them through their entire secondary and higher education journey.
- Work intentionally to attain and maintain consistent alignment of efforts from district, higher education, intermediary and community partners.
- Develop project management tools and processes to assist implementation of any large-scale transformational project and remain flexible as new needs arise.
Both Texas districts that participated in the Early College Expansion Partnership (ECEP) are situated within the Rio Grande Valley, locally known as “the Valley” or “RGV.” Geographically, the Valley is a relatively flat floodplain formed by the final 200-mile journey of the Rio Grande reaching for the Gulf of Mexico. Four counties are located within the Rio Grande Valley: Hidalgo, Cameron, Willacy and Starr. Together, these counties comprise an estimated 5 percent of the population of Texas with 1.4 million residents.\(^1\)

Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District (PSJA) is a tri-city public school district located within Hidalgo County that serves 32,000 students pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. Brownsville Independent School District (BISD) is also a public school district, serving 46,000 students pre-kindergarten through 12th grade and drawn from all of Cameron County. Demographic features of both counties indicate higher levels of localized economic disadvantage than the Texas and United States populations. Similarly, local educational attainment in the Rio Grande Valley falls behind state and national populations for the percentage of high school graduates, percentage of 18- to 24-year-olds with bachelor’s degrees and percentage of people 25 years and older with bachelor’s degrees.
The communities served by both districts indicate economically vulnerable populations, and student demographics highlight challenges to overcome and inspiration for large-scale school transformation.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Ethnicity (Hispanic)</th>
<th>Economically Disadvantaged</th>
<th>At Risk</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BISD</strong></td>
<td>98.36%</td>
<td>95.90%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PSJA</strong></td>
<td>98.93%</td>
<td>89.14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BISD</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>65.84%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PSJA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td>76.74%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BISD</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PSJA</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Limited English Proficiency</th>
<th>Migrant</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>BISD</strong></td>
<td>33.30%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PSJA</strong></td>
<td>41.59%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BISD</strong></td>
<td>1.26%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PSJA</strong></td>
<td>5.60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>BISD</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PSJA</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

These data illuminate the demographic context of these districts in the Valley. However, they fail to reveal the most powerful cultural asset that any community could harbor: la familia. David Ogden Stiers once mused, “Family means no one gets left behind or forgotten.” There is an incomparable sense of family in the Rio Grande Valley that binds together a community of companions, regardless of origin, who strive together to advance the common good. This cultural thread is woven throughout the fabric of the Valley and emerges in descriptions of professional partnerships, such as the observation of Dr. Shirley Reed, South Texas College President, who characterized her relationship with Dr. Daniel King, PSJA Superintendent, as follows: “It’s like a marriage. We have good times and we have tense times, but we come through because we have always shared the mission and the vision.” Caroline Myers, member of the BISD Advanced Academics team, reflected, “There is a sense of community here not found anywhere else. You see a team effort for everything, and teachers are viewed as extra sets of aunts and uncles and cousins who champion students’ success.”
Students themselves call out their school families as incubators of community service. David Garner, a 12th-grade student at PSJA Memorial Early College High School, was born in Germany and lived in Seattle before moving to the Valley. When asked what made him most proud of his community, David relayed that he is inspired by “the resiliency of the Valley. The support system is unique, and PSJA grads go on to do big things.” Every current and former student interviewed expressed longstanding commitments to service in the communities that had invested so mightily in their success. For Rebecca Luna, principal of Yzaguirre Middle School, the handing down of responsibility is personal: “I have three grandkids in this district, all in the same school. I keep them here, and not just because I bleed maroon and am home grown. We go to college, but then we come back to serve our community.”

Despite the economic and education challenges experienced by this region, one would be mistaken to overlook the deep commitments to subsequent generations in the Valley. As summarized by Caroline Myers, “this [early college] movement has been a leap of faith into the unknown. It is pouring into a generation that will make Brownsville and the Valley even better.”

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THE EARLY COLLEGE EXPANSION PARTNERSHIP (ECEP)

Both PSJA and BISD had initiated early college high school models prior to 2012, when a five-year Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) grant was awarded to Jobs for the Future (JFF), supported by Educate Texas, to further scale higher education readiness and course access for high school students. Intended student outcomes included an increase in middle school students’ readiness for high school, an increase in high school students’ access and success in college preparatory courses (such as Algebra I and English I), an increase in the percentage of students earning college credit (to 90 percent), and an increase in the number of students remaining in school. Successful implementation of the ECEP demanded five key components sustained by JFF, Educate Texas and both districts to ensure that participating schools maintained fidelity to the design elements of this transformation.
Although the period of performance for the ECEP ended in December 2017, both PSJA and BISD ISDs continued to build upon the hard-earned gains achieved through project implementation. As they reflected upon points of success, challenges and best practices, leaders shared that their work will continue until all students rise to the level of promise treasured by these communities. Dr. King wisely cautioned, “remain always dissatisfied with the current state of things.”

Epifania Pinales, who served as an i3 instructional coach in BISD during the project, described a paradigm shift that will not be abandoned: “It doesn’t seem like we’re done. Schools that weren’t even part of the grant are now hungry for exposure and refinement of instructional practices. The change took longer, but it never was ‘just an initiative’—it’s about good teaching. And they don’t want to go back to old ways.” In her current role on BISD’s Advanced Academic Services team, Ms. Pinales helps to disseminate instructional practices and high-quality professional learning to educators across the district.

A STORY OF GROWTH

### I3 Student Achievement in Algebra I and English Language Arts (ELA) I Increased from 2013 to 2017

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>ELA I</th>
<th>Algebra I</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2013</td>
<td>100% ↓</td>
<td>80% ↓</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017</td>
<td>40% ↑</td>
<td>80% ↑</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All i3 campuses had gains in student achievement and the majority of the campuses had gains that exceeded both district and state averages.

% of i3 graduates completing at least one college course increased from 2012-2016 more than the state*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Total Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2012-2016</td>
<td>37% ↑</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

In total, i3 campuses achieved

- increase in number of high school students completing at least one Advanced Placement/Dual-Credit (AP/DC) course, 8 points higher than state increases for the same time period

*Much of the work during the grant focused on the Class of 2017, yet gains were achieved for all students, even as systemic changes were being implemented.
In total, i3 campuses achieved

21%↑ increase in TSI readiness in math, 10 points higher than state increases for the same time period

28%↑ increase in TSI readiness for ELA, 16 points higher than state increases for the same time period

i3 students showed increases in TSI success that exceeded the state by 10 points for both ELA and Math from 2015-2016, a 300 percent increase in the number of students who could access college courses.

*Publicly available data were only reported for the class of 2015 and the class 2016.

Joel Vargas, Vice President of School and Learning Designs with JFF, reflected upon the great strides made by PSJA and BISD during the ECEP project:

“Since the grant began in 2013, PSJA has quadrupled the number of students graduating with postsecondary credentials; BISD increased the number of students by six times. Both districts experienced enhanced qualitative outcomes as well—teachers began to demand to implement a new professional development regime, the Common Instructional Framework generated its own demand and nurtured collaboration among teaching peers and parents increased their demand for early college high school approaches.”

By all accounts, the early college transformation experienced in PSJA and BISD is predicted to affect lasting positive change for students and the community. These results are aligned with national evidence of early college success. The lessons from this multi-year, multi-district effort are summarized in the succeeding pages to assist peers who may engage in similar transformative efforts.
If you ask parents and educators from PSJA and BISD ISDs what they are most proud of, the answer is swift: their students. Yet closer inspection reveals an array of intentional, systemic changes that were designed and fulfilled by adults to create the supportive environments needed for students to thrive. Chief points of success may be categorized by three concepts: expansion of customized, holistic supports for students to attain college-ready knowledge and behaviors; increasing college access and promoting a college-going culture through partnerships; and developing the strategic structures required to facilitate internal communication and continuous improvement.

**PARTNERSHIPS**

**STRATEGIC STRUCTURES**

**HOLISTIC SUPPORTS FOR STUDENTS**

Counseling plays a critical role in supporting both students and teachers in the ongoing drive toward college access and attainment. Sandra Velarde, an English teacher at PSJA Memorial Early College High School, explains, “our counselors are vital in communicating and guiding both students and teachers.” To manage the scale of student demand (six counselors for 2,000 students), PSJA counselors have designed processes and structures to serve a growing population of college-going students while ensuring that typical student counseling needs are also met. Some of these processes and structures include 40-minute time slots for student counseling, district-wide curricula developed and updated over the summers and specific lessons delivered during Friday luncheons. Counselor-developed lessons are disseminated to department heads, who then use a train-the-trainer model with teachers to deliver lessons on Fridays. The counseling curriculum is composed of three types of lessons: social-emotional learning, academic readiness and college readiness. All lessons are accessible to school staff on the district intranet and are delivered to every teacher on campus during Friday literacy periods. Denise Alonzo, a counselor at PSJA North Early College High School, notes, “Often, teachers don’t complete the entire lesson because students want to talk; this is normal and ok.”

“We don’t know the potential of each child. We do not build ceilings, we bring ladders. We want to use ladders to help them see above the walls—to show them what’s outside of the window...to say to them: ‘Look out there. There are many paths—which one is best for you?’”

— Dr. Daniel King, Superintendent, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District

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**In 2012-2013: Empowering Hearts and Minds | 11**
In this manner, students come to view all school staff—not only counselors—as crucial advocates for their personal and academic success. Educators from both districts view social-emotional learning supports as necessary core components that ensure students are prepared and successful when engaging in college rigor.

Go Centers in PSJA ISD are located at each high school and are staffed by counseling personnel to assist students’ individual quests to explore personalized college and/or career choices. Students can access Go Centers during advisory periods, English and history. Several students explained that, as high school graduation approaches, the Go Centers become hives of student activity.

A consistent mantra in PSJA is support “to and through” higher education credentials, and nowhere is this core belief more visible than with the district’s transition counselor role. Dr. King believes that “the district’s work is not done when [students] graduate.” College Transition Specialists initiate contact with PSJA’s seniors and help them complete applications and prepare for their higher education journeys. Additionally, college transition specialists help PSJA’s graduates resolve challenges that many students and families would find daunting, particularly first-generation college students. These specialists typically assist young alumni with academic probation situations, financial aid concerns and nonpayment recovery. Should a graduate need help of any kind, the transition counselors serve as a vital and comforting connection to the PSJA family. The initial pilot for transition counselors was funded through a grant from the Texas Education Agency and supported by Governor Rick Perry’s office in 2010. The district’s four transition counselors are now fully sustained by local funding.

In BISD, the Apex Learning program serves an important role in customized support for students as they strive to place “college ready” through the Texas Success Initiative.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SOCIAL EMOTIONAL LEARNING</th>
<th>ACADEMIC</th>
<th>COLLEGE READINESS</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MENTAL HEALTH</td>
<td>HIGH SCHOOL GRADUATION REQUIREMENTS</td>
<td>COLLEGE ADMISSION PROCESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PERSONAL RELATIONSHIPS</td>
<td>STATE ASSESSMENTS</td>
<td>COLLEGE ENTRANCE EXAMS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SOCIAL MEDIA</td>
<td>STUDENT CODE OF CONDUCT</td>
<td>COLLEGE DEGREE PLAN</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BULLYING</td>
<td>ATTENDANCE</td>
<td>DUAL-CREDIT COURSES</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SUICIDE PREVENTION</td>
<td>STUDENT EXPECTATIONS</td>
<td>SATISFACTORY ACADEMIC PROGRESS</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DRUG &amp; ALCOHOL AWARENESS</td>
<td>GRADUATION PLANS</td>
<td>LETTERS OF RECOMMENDATION</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BODY IMAGE</td>
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</table>
TSI assessment. TSI is the gatekeeper to most dual-credit courses in Texas, and Apex Learning provides TSI-aligned pre-assessments, diagnostic reports for instructional staff and individualized tutorials prior to retesting. Students must complete at least eight hours of active tutorial time prior to retesting, and the interactive digital platform is easily accessed by students on any device, allowing for ease of use in multiple settings within and outside of school. Similarly, PSJA developed a ticket system to track students who completed at least six hours of tutoring before the TSI assessment and found that, over time, the 10th-grade reading success rate doubled as a result, from 16 percent to 32 percent.

Holistic supports for students often demand holistic supports for their families, and both districts employ intentional strategies to extend these ties. Caroline Myers explained that, in BISD, educators genuinely strive to find common ground with families to build upon: “It starts with grassroots. If they are not interested in a transcript meeting, just have fellowship. Get on a first-name basis. Make connections based on what they need, not only what you want to learn from them.” One example of grassroots family involvement is the incorporation of parent leadership teams. With support from GEAR UP and others, parent leaders conduct their own needs assessments in the community and provide their own trainings around college access topics.

When families are in distress, students experience great difficulty in attending to academic priorities. Schools in both districts have embraced their responsibilities to support students at home as well as in the classroom, and families view their schools as caregiving networks when faced with crisis. In an example of such support, a middle school parent recently called to connect with resources that could help pay the electric bill during a stint of freezing temperatures. The family had fallen on hard times, with the father on a ventilator and the student regularly overseeing his physical care. With no other known options, the family reached out to the school for advice. Through networks of partners, the school bridged the family’s need to the appropriate resources.
If personalized supports for students and their families are the foundation for college success, then partnerships are the architecture. Early college high schools rely upon close associations among secondary and postsecondary institutions, as well as intermediary agencies, to provide the necessary preparation and access to college course taking. The relationship between each district and its higher education partner(s) requires an environment of compromise and collaborative decision-making. In both districts, high school dual-credit instructors are certified by their corresponding institutions of higher education to provide scheduling ease and meet the increasing demand for dual credit. Instructors also come from the colleges to teach on the high school campuses when there are no high school teachers with the necessary qualifications to teach college courses. Just as institutions of higher education serve an array of students from public and private K–12 environments, districts have remained open to higher education partnerships that best serve their diverse student populations. South Texas College, Texas Southmost College, University of Texas RGV and Texas A&M Kingsville are all supportive of dual-enrollment access for high school students in PSJA and BISD. Districts can actively reach out to new college partners as they expand accessibility to students.

Professional development is facilitated by K–12 and higher education leaders who view cross-training as a key to ongoing success. The colleges have provided curricular training to teachers to facilitate delivery of rigorous content, while the districts have shared methodological best practices with college personnel, such as instructional rounds and use of JFF’s Common Instructional Framework.

Educate Texas provided essential professional development and strategic planning support throughout the ECEP project and continues to support schools and districts across the state through an external coaching model. Early college administrators and teachers were provided summer workshop training and intensive, embedded coaching support. As Epifania Pinales explains, “We had a full year of training from Educate Texas to prepare us for coaching roles that included shadowing experiences, modeling and assessment of skills.” District coaches-in-training gained additional credibility through a culture of transparency—they videotaped their own sample lessons and asked master teachers to critique their performance. Because they experienced such vulnerability, district coaches incorporated humility and reflection in their practice. Transformative instruction and strategic planning at school and district levels were expedited through partnerships with JFF and Educate Texas.

**COMMON INSTRUCTIONAL FRAMEWORK**

- **COLLABORATIVE GROUP WORK**
- **WRITING TO LEARN**
- **SCAFFOLDING**
- **QUESTIONING**
- **CLASSROOM TALK**
- **LITERACY GROUPS**
Governance structures were essential to the ECEP project, and educators quickly learned that the existing arrangements that had worked well in the past were insufficient to meet new goals. Partners from all constituent groups developed communication systems built to facilitate the vision of early college. Cabinets, early college principals and other subcommittees convened to report on collected data and work through challenges to identify areas that could improve structures and processes to achieve the districts' vision for students. In BISD, a scaffolded approach to governance ensures appropriate levels of decision-making through the early college cabinet, early college directors' meetings and transitional and 8th-grade counselor meetings. Presentations and minutes are publicly archived on the BISD website. Educate Texas was instrumental in facilitating the shift in governance structures by strategically supporting districts in building consensus around a shared vision; establishing and refocusing subcommittee meetings; co-designing meeting agendas; facilitating discussion-based meetings that demonstrated the collaborative and meaningful partnerships which existed among stakeholders; and revisioning structures for improved problem-solving processes.10

It also became clear early in the ECEP project that structures for accessing and analyzing student achievement data were inadequate to support such a large-scale transformation effort. Educate Texas, the school districts and higher education partners strengthened their shared language and understanding of data by commissioning a joint task force with a mandate to develop and implement several strategies to streamline the use of available data. Some data had not been collected by either partner, and strategies were employed to harvest new information. The task force developed a common data language, negotiated data-sharing practices and facilitated connections among the goals and current reports.10

Improved data collection and analysis of TSI data provided students access to a variety of programs at the partnering college, such as biology, engineering, interdisciplinary studies and mathematics. Improved registration and enrollment procedures followed with the use of data dashboards by academic counselors to identify students eligible for college courses. As a result, high school freshmen who were eligible accessed college courses during their second semester.11

New demands on counseling services required innovative strategies to achieve scale. For example, in PSJA, counselors cross-train at the district level to share lessons that support academic and affective goals to ensure continuity among students who transfer within the district. Articulated communication strategies sought to navigate scheduling tasks between institutions of higher education and districts so as not to overwhelm teachers and counselors. BISD worked to create a counselor presentation that defines roles, explains decision-making processes and archives a problem-solution flow chart. This structured document has become the training guide for counselors.
As with any transformational effort, leadership matters, and turnover can create barriers to sustainability. Relationship-driven partnerships among education agencies and families make turnover more impactful than might be the case in the status quo. Key personnel changes during the ECEP project exposed additional needs to shore up communication and create redundancies that would withstand transitions and departures of leaders.

Human capital planning continues to be challenging because specialized roles require extensive professional training and experience that few people possess. As described by Susan Henderson, Deputy Director of Programs with Educate Texas, “The college advisor role needs both sides of the house and the career piece—qualified people are very hard to find.” Similar challenges have emerged in identifying qualified faculty to deliver dual-credit courses for rapidly increasing numbers of students. Locating enough instructors to fill student demand is an ongoing concern faced by both districts and higher education partners.

“Turnover is inevitable, but it can be particularly disruptive during the middle of a multiyear system change effort.”

– (Hooker, 2017, p. 17)
“Good is the enemy of great,” wrote Jim Collins (2001). ECEP seeded unparalleled growth for students in PSJA and BISD—both districts have reached new heights in student achievement because of the early college transformation, which begs the question, “What’s next?” Leaders have revealed that the next frontier may be overcoming the notion that student success is not ultimately tallied through high school diplomas or higher education credentials but when students are gainfully employed and leading productive adult lives.

To meet this challenge, the early college districts have begun thinking about how to incorporate more career pathways connected to locally based high-skill, high-wage fields such as communications, IT, engineering and health sciences. PSJA is developing a separate campus with degree and certificate programs in public safety. BISD hopes to explore new career pathways with locally emerging business and industry leaders such as SpaceX.

The intent of the ECEP project in Texas was to maximize early college access and success for students in comprehensive school settings. In the past, many early college high schools have provided wraparound supports to students in small school settings; this transformation required strategies that would ensure the same supports would reach thousands of students in PSJA and BISD. Personnel and funding constraints were mitigated by new methods of delegating responsibilities among team members to safeguard high-quality instruction and promoting affective student supports; however, questions still linger about the cost for transportation and stipends for adjunct faculty. An additional concern is that higher education partners in Texas are reimbursed for dual-enrollment tuition on a two-year lag. This creates some strain on the resources colleges are able to access for their current students. Furthermore, while emphasis has certainly been placed on increased dual-credit access and completion, evolving outcome-based student success measures developed at the state agency may inspire a closer inspection of academic quality (e.g., courses that are transferable to four-year institutions and/or lead to identified employment pathways).

“In training students for the future, we must help them become adaptable, life-long learners who have the depth to transfer knowledge into new contexts. [Comprehensive high schools] are where most young people across the country go to school, so we have to figure out how to impact them.”

– Joel Vargas, Vice President, School and Learning Designs, Jobs for the Future

“Success is now an expectation.”
Dominique Cara-Garza, Counselor, PSJA Memorial High School
Encouraging Persistence

PSJA engages in a recovery push to find disengaged students each September. It begins with a rally that includes inspirational speakers such as Dr. King, state representatives and local judges. School and district personnel spend three or four Saturdays tracking down students to “re-sell” opportunities at PSJA. Each team of educators gets 3–5 student profiles and packets of information with important dates, scheduling options and connections to business and industry to convince dropouts to return. In some cases, it takes multiple visits. One student was convinced to return to PSJA after a team of four principals visited his home. Schools that “zero out” first are provided with bonuses.

Communicate with families in their native languages.

Introduce families to new ways to support their students’ needs as learners in a rigorous college setting.

Develop early alert systems to capture student success in dual-credit courses and intervene when necessary.

Assess students’ college readiness in middle grades to allow time for prescriptive academic support.

Focus on 8th-grade reading to support increasing academic rigor.

Consider looping in guidance counselors for students in grades 6–12.

Reframe dropout recovery as an opportunity for acceleration.

Support young alumni through higher education experiences.

“Naysayers will remark, ‘These [high school] kids just can’t.’ That’s a bunch of b.s. Mainly, they are just lacking the confidence.”

— Dr. Shirley Reed, President, South Texas College
“Each high school is unique and requires tailored modifications to gain buy-in.”

– Epifania Pinales, Lead Teacher, Advanced Academic Services, Brownsville Independent School District

| Provide a clear, unifying vision for change. |
| Use data to drive action. |
| Develop a shared set of objectives. |
| Engage in a local planning process. |
| Find the value proposition for each constituent group. |
| Remember that compromise is part of healthy relationships. |
| Meet on stakeholders’ home turf to ensure participation. |
| Accept that achieving buy-in is ongoing and never ending. |
| Demonstrate sustainable outcomes. |
| Make change a collaborative process. |

**Embracing Learning**

Both students and teachers cited a shared value of learning (sometimes through failure) as a lever to gain buy-in on the ground. In BISD, an unintended consequence of ECEP became revised expectations for external professional development. Teachers now expect to be engaged in learning, as opposed to being passive consumers of professional development.
“If you are going to be an early college district, you have to start things early. [College readiness] doesn’t happen overnight.”

– Merrill Hammons, Advanced Academics Administrator, Brownsville Independent School District

Perform a needs assessment to align initiatives.
Communicate relentlessly.
Establish standard language and practices for data.
Share leadership responsibilities across constituent groups.
Create and revise memoranda to meet changing needs.
Create efficient systems of redundancy.
Bring discipline and focus through critical accountability partners.

Ensuring Accountability

The PSJA district administration began each cabinet meeting with each principal reporting school-level data to hold principals accountable for positive change reflected in data points concerning TSI, dual enrollment, course completion and early alerts.

Spread burdens and challenges among teammates.
Remove scaffolding gradually and deliberately.
Embed instructional expectations into performance appraisals.
Distribute new learning through communities of practice.
Implement academic rigor with fidelity.
Dismantle instructional silos.
Leverage school-based expertise to achieve scale.
REFERENCES


Jobs for the Future. (n.d.). Early college high schools get results with students who have been underrepresented in higher education. Retrieved from https://www.jff.org/resources/page/1/.


3 Source: 2012-2016 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates.


7 Source: Jobs for the Future. (n.d.). Early college high schools get results with students who have been underrepresented in higher education.


Educate Texas is a public-private initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas that works to strengthen the public and higher education system in Texas so that every student is prepared for and succeeds in school, in the workforce and in life. For over a decade, Educate Texas has helped guide schools, districts and higher education institutions through the process of designing early college schools, implementing effective governance structures and strengthening instruction and student support. Educate Texas has supported the districtwide implementation of early college in Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District (PSJA ISD) since 2008. As a part of the Early College Expansion Partnership, Education Texas has played a central role in technical assistance and instructional coaching in PSJA ISD and Brownsville ISD.

Jobs for the Future (JFF) has played a leading role in launching and shaping early colleges nationwide since 2002, when it became coordinator of the Early College High School Initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. More recently, JFF and partners have focused on adapting early college designs to new contexts and on informing state and federal policies to bring high-quality dual enrollment and early college opportunities to more students. In the ECEP districts, JFF has provided strategic advising to central office staff along with leadership coaching for principals and instructional coaching for teachers.

Additional topic briefings about data, governance, counseling and the Texas Success Initiative are available. For more information, visit edtx.org.