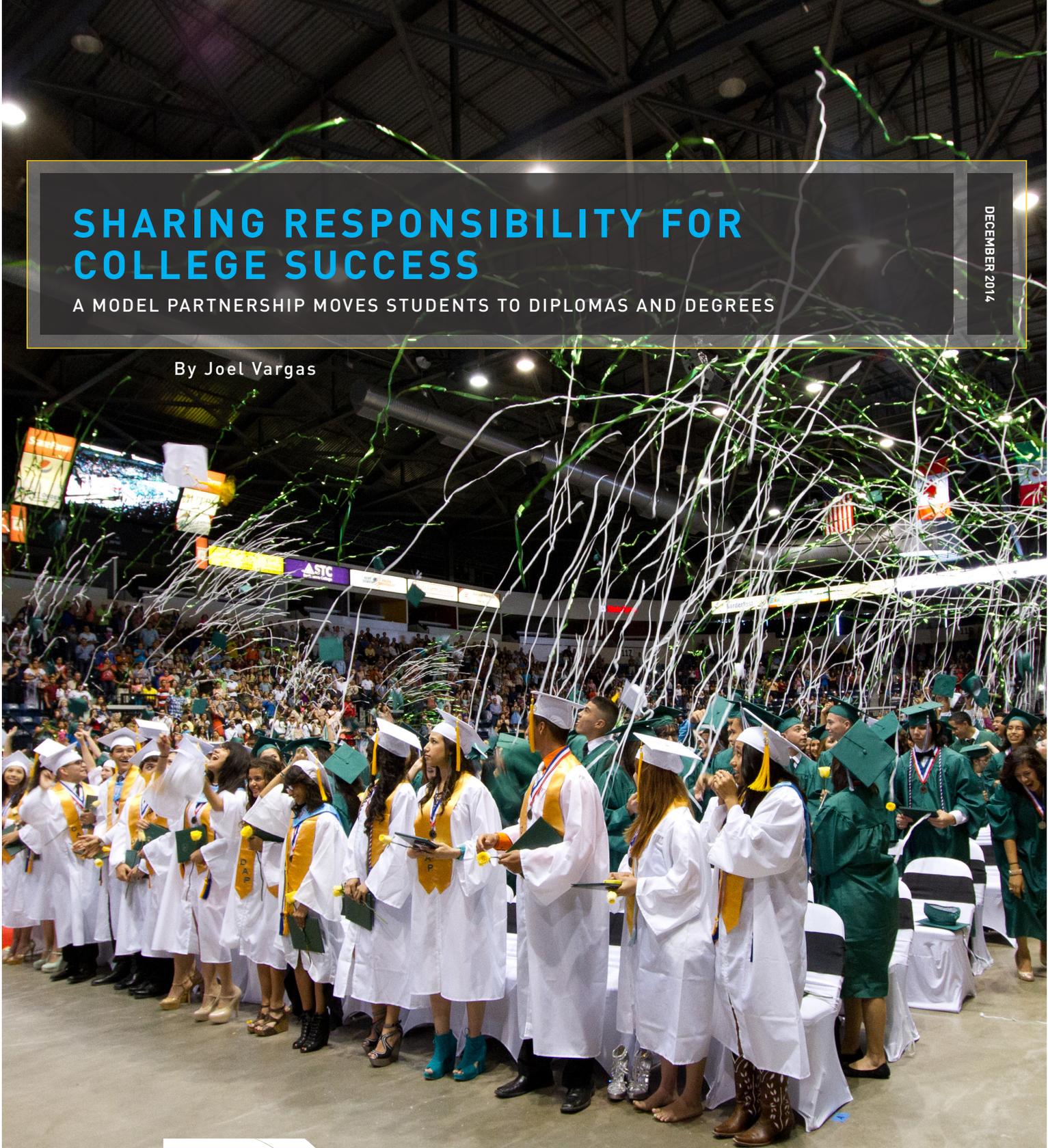


SHARING RESPONSIBILITY FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS

A MODEL PARTNERSHIP MOVES STUDENTS TO DIPLOMAS AND DEGREES

DECEMBER 2014

By Joel Vargas



Early
College
Designs



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE



EDUCATE TEXAS

a public-private initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas



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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I am grateful for the generosity of the educators and students from Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District and South Texas College. They spent substantial time in sharing their stories and data, and they are rightly proud about what they have accomplished and humbled and enthusiastic about everything they still wish to achieve. Special thanks go to PSJA Superintendent Daniel King and South Texas College President Shirley Reed and their staffs. Alma Garcia and her colleagues at Educate Texas were also vital in their support of the paper and in their long, ongoing support of the PSJA-South Texas College partnership. My JFF colleagues, Carol Gerwin, Danita Jo Talbot, Marlene Seltzer, and Michael Webb provided important feedback and advice on the piece. And our communications team has done its usual terrific job to make this attractive and readable.

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INTRODUCTION

Completing a postsecondary credential has become increasingly imperative for entering a well-paying career. But our systems of public high schools and colleges were not designed to produce the large number of postsecondary educated youth that our economy now demands. There are numerous obstacles to improving this situation, but most significant are the entrenched assumptions about the proper roles and responsibilities of high schools and higher education. High schools generally see their role as getting students ready for college. Their responsibility ends when the principal hands out diplomas on graduation day. Colleges, for their part, generally see their responsibilities as starting on the day students step onto campus.

This brief describes a school district partnership with colleges that is operating under a much different set of assumptions—and resulting in far greater success for the region’s young people. The Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) Independent School District serves 32,000 students in one of the nation’s most impoverished areas, the Rio Grande Valley, about 10 miles from the U.S.-Mexico border. For the past seven years, under the leadership of Superintendent Daniel King, PSJA has worked with South Texas College and other partners to redefine the boundaries between secondary and postsecondary education and to assume joint responsibility for the postsecondary success of the region’s youth.

Since the collaboration began, high school graduation rates have soared and many students are earning substantial college credit—for free—by graduation. A large proportion of the senior class is graduating with postsecondary credentials and degrees. In the words of PSJA’s “College Cubed” (College³) motto, the district and its partners are working intently toward the same goal—that every graduate be *ready* for college, *connected* to college, and, ultimately, able to *complete* college. A vivid illustration of the success so far: Of all South Texas College students earning a postsecondary credential during the 2013-14 academic year, 9 percent were still looking forward to graduating from a PSJA high school.

The momentum into and through college and toward careers is remarkable in an area where few adults have college credentials, 99 percent of students are Hispanic, 87 percent are “economically disadvantaged,”¹ and 42 percent are English language learners. The success of PSJA does not have to be—nor should it be allowed to become—

an anomaly. The strategies used in PSJA to adopt an early college design at all of its high schools, and to foster shared ownership of postsecondary success, offer lessons for states and communities about how to rethink the systems that support the transition from high school to college completion.

This brief describes how the district's sustained attention to advancing an early college-for-all strategy in partnership with South Texas College and other partners is having a significant impact on the community. JFF previously wrote about PSJA's efforts in *Launching Early College Districtwide* in 2012, documenting the initial years of system change and improved student results (Le 2012). Since then, the district and its partners have continued to make steady progress, broaden their reach, and deepen their effectiveness.

Their uncommon commitment to increase college readiness and success rates for youth is emblematic of their shared responsibility for students who are making the transition from high school through college. Their ideals and their actions have led to unusually strong student outcomes and provide an example that more districts and colleges should emulate.

The first section of this paper highlights the growing impact of early college designs on school culture, as well as student outcomes. The second section outlines the four early college designs in place across the district. The third section describes the key strategies that PSJA and its postsecondary partners use to advance their goals. The conclusion identifies some of the challenges to the work and plans for the future.

PSJA INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT (AS OF OCTOBER 2014)

- > Total # students in district: 32,270
- > Total # of high school students in district: 8,736
- > % English language learners in district: 42.3%
- > % “economically disadvantaged” in district: 87.3%

BUILDING MOMENTUM FOR COLLEGE COMPLETION: MANY MORE STUDENTS COULD BENEFIT FROM TAKING COLLEGE COURSES IN HIGH SCHOOL

Enrolling high school students in college courses has gained acceptance over the past decade as a strategy for increasing college readiness and success for a wide range of students, particularly those traditionally underrepresented in higher education.

For example, early college high schools—small schools that support students to earn one to two years of college credit or an Associate’s degree along with their diploma—have spread across the country. More than 280 early colleges have been created since 2002, serving over 80,000 students annually, with impressive outcomes for low-income and other underrepresented youth (Webb 2014). Based on the success of these schools, JFF has promoted and supported state and local efforts to implement early college designs in more types of high schools so that all young people can graduate with the critical momentum of at least 12 college credits toward a degree or credential.

Dual enrollment in traditional high schools is also on the rise. Surveys of high schools and postsecondary institutions suggest that the number of high school students taking college courses had grown by over half a million students between the 2002-03 school year and 2010-11 (Kleiner & Lewis 2005, Marken et al. 2013).²

Research consistently shows that college course taking by high school students helps them to graduate high school better prepared for college and with momentum toward earning a college degree. A study by JFF on the college outcomes of dual enrollees from Texas found that they were 2.2 times more likely to enroll in state two- and four-year colleges, 2 times more likely to return for a second year, and 1.7 times more likely to complete a degree than non-dual enrollees from otherwise similar academic and social backgrounds (Struhl & Vargas 2012).

IMPACT

EARLY COLLEGE COURSE TAKING IS IMPROVING OUTCOMES AND GETTING TO SCALE

When Superintendent King arrived at PSJA in 2007, the school district's four-year graduation rate was 62 percent. Just three years later, that rate had risen to 86.7 percent. And by 2013, the rate had climbed to over 90 percent, according to the most recently available state data, now substantially higher than the 85 percent statewide rate for "economically disadvantaged" students.³

Simultaneously, more students are starting and completing some college, including certificates and degrees, by high school graduation. In the 2010-11 school year, 1,700 PSJA high school students—about 22 percent—took college courses from South Texas College and other college partners. By 2013-14, that number had risen to 2,800 and the percentage to 33 percent. In 2013, 103 graduating seniors—about 5 percent—received an Associate's degree or college-level certification. By 2014, just one year later, 370 graduating seniors—about 21 percent—had earned the same. (See "Student Success" box.) There are no national data about comparable Associate's degree earning rates by high school students, but a rigorous national study of early college high schools found that only 1 percent of the randomly assigned control group of non-early college students ever earned an Associate's degree (Berger, et al 2013).

Moreover, more than half of PSJA's 2014 graduating class—58 percent—had earned some college credits. By point of comparison, only about 10 percent of students nationally earn college credit while in high school (National Center for Education Statistics 2011).

Future graduates appear to be on pace to continue these gains. PSJA projects that in spring of 2015, about 550 graduating seniors—28 percent—will receive an Associate's degree or other college certification from South Texas College.

STUDENT SUCCESS

PSJA high school graduation rate

2006-07 school year: 62%

2009-10 school year: 86.7%

2012-13 school year: 90%

PSJA high school students taking college courses

2010-11 school year: 22% (1,700 students)

2013-14 school year: 33% (2,800 students)

PSJA graduating seniors earning an Associate's degree or college-level certification

2012-13 school year: 5% (103 graduating seniors)

2013-14 school year: 21% (370 graduating seniors)

EARLY COLLEGE IS BRINGING MUTUAL BENEFITS FOR HIGH SCHOOL AND COLLEGE PARTNERS

In the 2014 academic year, PSJA's primary college partner, South Texas College, awarded just over 4,800 occupational certificates, Associate's degrees, and Bachelor's degrees. Of students earning these credentials, 1,445 were dual enrollment graduates from high school districts across the region—including many from PSJA.

Of the 2,508 total South Texas College graduates earning Associate's degrees in the 2013-14 academic year, 17 percent were dual enrollees from regional high schools, and about 5 percent were PSJA students. There are no comparable national data about postsecondary credentials granted to high school students as dual enrollees. But to put this rate into some perspective, of all students entering community colleges in the United States in 2003-04, only 14 percent had ever earned an Associate's degree six years later (RTI International 2014). In this respect, South Texas College is probably launching more students to postsecondary credentials than community colleges nationally by virtue of reaching them while they're in high school.

Thirty-eight percent of students earning Associate's degrees in math and 56 percent of those earning Associate's degrees in physics were PSJA students. In addition, 15 percent of South Texas College graduates earning certificates, in areas such as computer and application specialists, health electronic records, medical assistant technology, and structural welding, were PSJA students. These figures not only represent a remarkable achievement by PSJA and its students but also an effective strategy being used by South Texas College to increase college success and graduation in the region.

“DR. DANIEL KING AND I SHARE THE COMMITMENT TO ‘CREATING A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE’ FOR THE RIO GRANDE VALLEY WHERE ATTENDING AND COMPLETING COLLEGE IS POSSIBLE, EXPECTED, AND AFFORDABLE FOR ALL. OUR PARTNERSHIP AND STRATEGIES OF EARLY COLLEGE HIGH SCHOOLS, AND DUAL ENROLLMENT ARE TRANSFORMING THE REGION, CHANGING THE LIVES OF STUDENTS, THEIR FAMILY, AND THE NEXT GENERATION. EDUCATION IMPACTS WAGES, WHICH IMPACTS THE PER CAPITA INCOME IN A COMMUNITY. CONSEQUENTLY, WE BELIEVE EDUCATION DRIVES PROSPERITY.”

– SHIRLEY REED, PRESIDENT OF SOUTH TEXAS COLLEGE

COLLEGE³ STRATEGIES ARE REINFORCING LEARNING WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

PSJA has opened three community education centers in the buildings of former elementary schools, serving over 2,000 PSJA parents and other adults with courses in GED, English as a Second Language, literacy, citizenship, and vocational skills, many of which are offered in partnership with South Texas College or taught by volunteers. This is both boosting learning for adults taking the courses and engendering positive conversations and understanding between students and their parents about schooling and educational achievement. One parent said that by having children see their parents studying and learning, they see the “value of learning by example.” Last year’s waitlist for services was 1,000 parents, which is prompting PSJA to make plans to double the number of parents served next year. Since PSJA makes use of underutilized facilities for these programs and staffs the program with volunteers and South Texas College faculty at discounted tuition rates, it appears to have found a sustainable financial model capable of reaching substantial numbers of parents in the community.

THE CAPACITY FOR SUSTAINING AND EXPANDING THESE EFFORTS IS GROWING

There are signs of increasing alignment in vision and shared strategies at various levels of PSJA’s work. PSJA principals and district-level leaders describe in common ways their reliance on and expectations of each other to advance the “College³” vision. Principals call each other for advice, and if one high school doesn’t offer a particular college course, they collaborate to ensure that students from that school are able to avail themselves of the course offered at another high school. They report being increasingly dependent on each other to reinforce, strengthen, and develop strategies rather than relying primarily on the catalytic, visionary superintendent. The success of coaching teachers in the instructional methods being used in many classrooms to bolster early college success is creating natural demand from other middle school, high school, and college teachers who want to improve their pedagogy.

STATE AND NATIONAL PARTNERS

Educate Texas

Educate Texas is a public-private initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas that works statewide to increase postsecondary readiness for low-income students. A key strategy has been opening early college high schools, in partnership with the Texas Education Agency, Jobs for the Future, and local community colleges.

In 2008, Educate Texas and South Texas College approached Superintendent Daniel King about opening an early college in PSJA, following the district's successful launch of an early college for former dropouts. King wanted to ensure these opportunities for all of PSJA's 8,000-plus high school students and Educate Texas signed on to help guide the work.

Started by a major college readiness grant from the Texas Education Agency, Educate Texas has been helping the district to make key strategic leadership decisions. The initiative also brokers and coordinates partnerships with area colleges and community organizations, and provides instructional coaches to work with teachers at every high school.

Jobs for the Future

Jobs for the Future has been working with Educate Texas and the Texas Education Agency to open early college high schools across the state since 2002. As national coordinator of the Early College High School Initiative, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, JFF helped shape and spread common principles of early college to new school developers.

In 2010, Educate Texas engaged Jobs for the Future to help PSJA create a district-wide portfolio of options that enable all students to graduate high school with at least 12 college credits. In 2012, JFF formed the Early College Expansion Partnership and won a highly competitive \$15 million "Investing in Innovation" grant from the U.S. Department of Education to expand the early college model to all of the high schools in PSJA (as well as the Brownsville Independent School District in Texas and Denver Public Schools).

JFF has focused on intensive instructional coaching to help faculty help students prepare for college-prep and college-level coursework. JFF also advises on the development of early college pathways in every school, works continuously with the central office to build district capacity to support its mission, documents promising practices and lessons learned, and leads policy and advocacy work to support early college designs.

DESIGNS: STUDENTS TAKE MULTIPLE PATHS TO COMMON GOAL

The leaders of PSJA have the same goal for all of their students, but they recognize that different young people may take different paths to achieve it. As PSJA has expanded early college to thousands of students, the district has provided multiple options to meet their wide variety of needs and interests. JFF's first report on PSJA's "early college for all" strategy described the vision this way:

Some students will graduate with several college courses under their belt, confident that they can succeed in college. Some will earn industry-recognized technical certificates that can help them get jobs to work their way through college and advance their careers. Still others will graduate high school with an Associate's degree, ready to specialize in medicine, engineering, or another career path at a four-year college (Le 2012).

The district offers four distinct designs that integrate high school and college:

- 1. Standalone Early College High Schools:** Three schools offer their student the support and sequence of courses needed to earn up to 60 college credits or an Associate's degree along with their diploma. One is a small school for teenage parents. One is a STEM-focused early college high school serving just over 500 students. The other is an 1,800-student comprehensive high school that has been converted into a school-wide early college school.
- 2. Back on Track to College:** Two schools serve students who have been identified as off-track for high school graduation or who at some point left school altogether. One focuses on 18- to 26-year-old youth, and the other specializes in serving 15- to 21-year-olds. Both have adapted the early college design in order to motivate students to get "back on track" not just to high school graduation, but to enter and succeed in college. The courses start with college success courses and move them as quickly as possible to college-level coursework.
- 3. Dual to Degree Pathways:** At three comprehensive high schools, the district is redesigning grades 11 and 12 to provide dual enrollment opportunities for all students who are connected to a program of study leading to a postsecondary certificate or college degree. Teachers of earlier grade levels are receiving training in instructional strategies that can prepare more of their students to succeed in college courses, with the aim of graduating with at least 12 transferable college credits.

4. School Within a School Early College High Schools: The same three comprehensive high schools with Dual to Degree pathways, also have small early college learning communities that put students on pathways to earn up to 60 college credits or an Associate's degree. The colocation of these small learning communities with the Dual to Degree Pathways has been intentionally structured to foster the cross-fertilization of learning and practices for staff between the two about early college expectations and instructional strategies. Teachers from the first two small learning communities received instructional coaching and began to implement many of the strategies there before being assigned teaching responsibilities in the Dual to Degree Pathways, where they implemented the same approaches and spread learning about these practices to their peers. Eventually all of these school within school designs are to be scaled up and their capacity grown to evolve into school-wide, standalone early college high schools.

In order to make these outcomes possible, all of PSJA's eight high schools have been designed to incorporate meaningful tuition-free college courses into the regular program of study that will count toward a postsecondary degree or credential. Each school shares responsibility for student success with postsecondary partners and each supports students as they make the transition from PSJA into college.

But teachers do not wait until students reach high school to begin their preparation for college. All eight middle schools are focused on improving classroom instruction, providing explicit guidance about the academic and behavioral expectations of early college high schools, and building a school culture that promotes a college-going identity and career awareness.

TEXAS STATE POLICY SUPPORTS EARLY COLLEGE FOR ALL

A number of state policies in Texas have enabled local school districts and colleges to provide more dual enrollment and early college opportunities to students. Most notably, in 2003, the legislature made it possible for school districts and colleges to both claim per pupil funding for dual enrollees. Since that time districts receive full ADA funding for each high school student enrolled in college courses offered for dual enrollment. Community colleges receive the same funding for dual enrolled high school students as they receive for regular college students. Although this does not cover all costs associated with college course taking by high school students, it does provide substantial support in helping to meet the state's requirement that all districts provide every student with the opportunity to earn a minimum of 12 college credits before graduating from high school. PSJA and South Texas College have been two of the leaders in the state in using these policies to maximize the college readiness and success of youth in the Rio Grande Valley.

EARLY COLLEGE IN PSJA

HIGH SCHOOLS

PSJA Early College High School

<http://bears.psjaisd.us>

- > Grade 9, scaling to school wide
- > 243 students
- > San Juan

PSJA Memorial Early College High School

<http://wolverines.psjaisd.us>

- > Grades 9-11, scaling to school wide
- > 373 students
- > Alamo

PSJA North Early College High School

<http://raiders.psjaisd.us>

- > Grades 9-12, scaling to school wide
- > 606 students
- > Pharr

PSJA Southwest Early College High School

<http://javelinas.psjaisd.us>

- > Grades 9-12, standalone model
- > 1,791 students
- > Pharr

**PSJA projects that each of the above high schools will eventually serve over 2,000 students in this growing region.*

PSJA Thomas Jefferson T-STEM Early College High School

<http://tstem.psjaisd.us>

- > Grades 9-12, standalone model
- > 521 students
- > Pharr

SPECIAL-PURPOSE CAMPUSES

College, Career & Technology Academy (CCTA)

<http://ccta.psjaisd.us>

- > “Back on Track” school serving former dropouts
- > 200 students
- > Pharr

PSJA Sonia M. Sotomayor Early College High School

<http://sotomayor.psjaisd.us>

- > Serves teenage parents, standalone model
- > 6 students currently in 9th grade; will serve approximately 100 students when fully scaled.
- > Pharr

PSJA Elvis J. Ballew High School

<http://www.psjaisd.us/ballewhs>

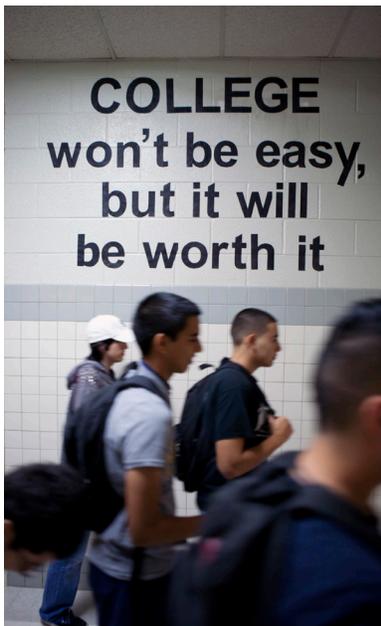
- > Planning year, dual-enrollment STEM Academy
- > Will serve approximately 200 students
- > San Juan

HISTORY

*The following is an excerpt from *Launching Early College Districts Districtwide* (Le 2012).*

When Daniel P. King arrived in Pharr-San Juan-Alamo in 2007, he came with experience in creating college-connected pathways for every student. As superintendent in nearby Hidalgo, Texas, a small community a few miles to the south, he had led the expansion of early college for all to the district's 3,600 students. Under his leadership, Hidalgo became nationally known for innovation and results: Along with their high school diplomas, nearly all of the graduates of Hidalgo's early college have earned transferrable college credits. Two-thirds of the class of 2010—the first crop of Hidalgo early college students to graduate—had earned a semester or more of credit.

King often spoke with other superintendents about Hidalgo's transformation, but many were skeptical that its successes could be replicated in large, complex districts. King was intent on showing that such school systems could achieve college readiness for all. When he took the helm at Pharr-San Juan-Alamo, he took strategic steps to build the credibility and support needed for districtwide reform.



STRATEGIES

The transformation of PSJA's high schools is far from finished. The substantial progress so far, and the expectation of continued progress in the future, are the result of sustained attention to four key strategies that align the daily work of high school staff and students with the "College³" vision:

1. Fostering shared ownership of the "College³" vision
2. Creating new roles and responsibilities
3. Aligning district systems and services in support of students and staff
4. Structuring and strengthening college partnerships



FOSTERING SHARED OWNERSHIP OF THE "COLLEGE³" VISION

The power of symbols and slogans is not lost on Superintendent King or his colleagues. The "College³" logo is displayed prominently inside schools, across the district's web site, on school buses and other district vehicles, on printed materials, even on the entrance to the sports complex. It is inspirational and aspirational—a constant reminder to all of PSJA's vision for every student.

The vision originated seven years ago, shortly after King became superintendent and started to analyze the distressingly low graduation rate. He reached out to South Texas College President Shirley Reed and the pair collaborated to design the district's first dual enrollment campus, specifically for young people who had left high school or were behind grade level and unlikely to graduate on time. (See *History box*.) The success of the College, Career & Technology Academy (CCTA) at reengaging these students, getting them "back on track" to graduation, and smoothing their transition to postsecondary education provided a potent proof point within the district: if the strategy of acceleration into college could work for off-track students, surely it was one that could benefit many others (Allen & Wolfe 2010).

King has been deliberate about building on CCTA's success to spread the "College³" vision throughout the district. For example, he has focused on grooming passionate and effective school leaders to take on larger roles. While planning for one of the district's comprehensive high schools to introduce the early college model, King selected a former

principal of CCTA, Linda Carrillo, to head the school and help establish its “college ready-connected-complete” culture. The principal of one of the first comprehensive high schools to implement early college, Nora Rivas-Garza, now leads another comprehensive high school that is newer to the work. The new principal of CCTA is Yolanda Gomez, who formerly headed one of the early college “school within a school” designs at a comprehensive high school and is herself a PSJA alumnus.

According to Gomez and other principals, the superintendent uses each school’s data to establish college credit-taking goals that motivate principals, and he encourages them to work both with their teachers and their peers in other high schools to find ways to reach them. After experiencing this approach consistently for seven years, Gomez and her peers report to now know what questions King is going to raise about outcomes before he asks, internalizing the goals themselves. These high expectations have gradually seeped into the shared expectations of school staff and students, too.

Teachers reflect on how to sharpen their practice through instructional rounds—observations and constructive critiques of each other’s work—designed to help strengthen their pedagogy and use of a Common Instructional Framework.⁴ The framework contains six instructional strategies that have proven effective in preparing more students for college. It also outlines a set of common expectations about teaching quality and depth of learning across schools and subject areas. The approach has attracted interest from South Texas College, which has supported the participation of several college instructors in framework trainings.

As for the students, they take concrete steps toward college early. Eighth graders take college placement tests and receive counseling about the meaning of the results. Then they develop plans to take the steps necessary to qualify for taking college courses during high school, forming postsecondary goals and paths to that goal in the process. Every student has opportunities—and support—to prepare for starting a college course sequence.

For this report, we spoke to a diverse array of young people who have benefited from early college experiences, including: a former incarcerated gang member who returned to graduate high school while earning a postsecondary welding certificate; a young woman with enough credits to earn an Associate’s degree in biology and who was planning to attend the University of Texas-Pan American; a young woman who recently had a baby and was back at school days later (thanks, in part, to child care arranged by the district through local providers) aiming to finish a postsecondary certificate in phlebotomy because she “wants to go to college for my baby.”

Although continued work is underway to ensure that ultimately all students achieve some postsecondary success before high school graduation, the district certainly appears committed to the mantra that “all” means “all.”

CREATING NEW ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES

Both PSJA and South Texas College have created new staff roles to help achieve the goal of connecting students to college and supporting their postsecondary success. District leaders have also been intentional about hiring staff who span and understand both the high school and college environments and can help students navigate the transition between the two. Similarly, high school teachers are sought and hired who have the qualifications in their subject area (typically a Master’s degree) to become adjunct college faculty and teach college courses that can be counted for dual credit toward high school and college requirements.

One of the boundary-spanning staff members is College Readiness Director Guadalupe Chávez, whom King recruited from South Texas College, where he had been a Director of High School Programs and a veteran staff member at this and other colleges for 23 years. Chavez has used his knowledge of postsecondary programming to improve and routinize the district's processes and systems that allow for the seamless incorporation of college courses into high school at such a large scale. This includes the identification of the kinds and types of college courses students will need each year from South Texas College and other colleges based on their postsecondary degree/credential plans.

Notably, South Texas College employs a counterpart, Nick Gonzalez, who is the liaison to all of the institution's early college partnerships with area high schools. The liaison helps PSJA to implement many systems that are essential to student success, including:

- **Data-sharing** between the district and college so that each has access to timely information about student progress.
- **Standardized processes and timelines** for college registration and degree planning activities, such as early completion of federal financial aid forms (i.e., FAFSA) and college tours for large groups of students and families.
- **Single-point communication** between the district and the college that eliminates the need for multiple high school staff members continually calling South Texas College with their own questions and requests.
- **Administration of the Texas Success Initiative college placement tests to all students** early and the organization of summer "boot camps" to help high school students prepare for the tests.⁵
- **Audits of student transcripts** that provide high school counselors with information about student progress toward degree or credential goals and allow them to correct instances of college course taking that are not efficiently leading students toward a college pathway. The audits also help high schools anticipate when to make particular college course sections available for students who need to fill certain requirements to continue advancing toward a degree or credential.
- **Guidance to ensure that all PSJA graduates have a "Year 13" plan**, so that they arrive at college knowing what courses to take and resources to seek in order to succeed.

The district also employs five college transition counselors to help PSJA graduates make a smooth transition into and through the first crucial year at local two- and four-year colleges. The counselors, who are located on local college campuses and are plugged into social media, call themselves a "one-stop shop" for PSJA graduates at each school and also support PSJA graduates at other area colleges. They advise both students and parents in navigating scheduling issues, financial aid, and degree/credential/career plans. Their focus is not only present success, but also encouraging students to look ahead and starting to prepare for further college education or a career. They are proactive, organizing summer bridge programs and other strategies to prepare students academically and get them acclimated to college. They also advise college leaders about ways to create more effective support systems for student success in the future.

One strategy that makes it possible for PSJA to offer college courses to so many high school students is the district's employment of high school teachers who are qualified to be adjunct college instructors. PSJA students also take college courses from full-time college faculty on college campuses and at their high schools. But using existing high school faculty to teach college courses is the most economical way to offer them because these teachers are already on the district payroll. PSJA has established financial incentives for teachers to take the graduate-level courses needed to qualify as adjuncts, while making it a priority

of human resources staff to recruit and hire new high school teachers who have Master's degrees in their subject areas so that they can teach college courses.

It is not only teachers and school administrators, but also parents and community members who have taken on new responsibilities at PSJA. An integral part of connecting all students to college is the engagement of their parents and their community in the endeavor of learning.

The parent engagement and community centers reinforce the communal and familial focus on “college for all” in the PSJA community. To head this effort, Dr. King hired a 19-year veteran of the district's disciplinary center, Olivia Benford, who had helped to calm the roiling of that center dealing with the then-gang presence permeating PSJA. She has created a program that leverages the assets of the community, offering a variety of courses taught by South Texas College at a discounted rate to the district, by retired teachers in the area, and by other people with experience and expertise who spend the winter months in or have permanently relocated to warmer South Texas. South Texas College provides parents with a college ID so that they can access campus facilities and services just as other college students. Parents pay nothing for this but give back by committing to 10 hours of community service.

Open 8 am to 8 pm, the community centers are located in former PSJA school buildings in each of the district's three communities, Pharr, San Juan, and Alamo. The centers have a mutually beneficial relationship with the education and family support organization AVANCE. The 40-year-old, San Antonio-based nonprofit focuses on fortifying families in low-income communities by strengthening parenting skills and providing early childhood education programs. Through their partnership, AVANCE is advancing its mission by gaining a sustainable presence in a new region, and PSJA is able to take advantage of external assistance to help meet the needs of its families.

ALIGNING SYSTEMS AND SERVICES TO SUPPORT STUDENTS AND STAFF

Providing effective supports to both students and staff is essential to the success of early college designs. Spreading the model district wide, PSJA strives to systematize support services within its secondary schools so that students, teachers, and school leaders can all work together effectively to achieve college ready, connected, and complete goals. In doing so, the district emphasizes the use of data, collaboration, and consistency in practices. It also enlists assistance from colleges and other partners.

PSJA has developed a wide variety of strategies to keep students on track for college success. These include direct services, ranging from tutoring to after-school meals, as well as new administrative systems. Among the approaches increasingly embedded into the routines of PSJA's high schools are:

- Students taking college placement tests are not required to travel to unfamiliar settings because The College Board has recognized all of PSJA's high schools as testing sites.
- The district provides dinner in conjunction with after-school tutoring programs so that students have nourishment during their studies that they may not always have at home.
- Students enrolled in college courses can use South Texas College's tutorial services, as well as the district's.
- Every high school has established early-warning systems and uses data summaries to monitor individual academic progress and provide this information immediately to students and families. Early indicators of falling off track, such as a student's GPA falling below a certain level, trigger required interventions,

such as tutoring or participation in targeted study groups. Staff members ensure that students and their families are well aware of these expectations by requiring them to sign contracts with their schools verifying their understanding and support of needed interventions.

- The district is working with school counselors and teachers to implement a common approach to academic and career planning. Organized by grade-level cohorts, the new system calls for school and district staff to use common data indicators for each class. This helps inform development of master schedules and in gauging the need for securing sections of particular college courses.

Instructional coaching is the foundation of staff development for both middle and high school teachers. Every teacher of an early college design receives regular coaching, embedded within their classrooms, from PSJA, with assistance from Jobs for the Future and Educate Texas, a long-time partner of many Texas school districts and colleges. The aim is to institute JFF's Common Instructional Framework across secondary school classrooms and subjects in order to improve student engagement in, ownership of, and use of college-ready learning strategies. The framework outlines six essential classroom practices: collaborative group work, writing to learn, scaffolding, questioning, classroom talk, and literacy groups. Teachers are also all provided with common planning time, where they can meet to review student data and discuss how to help individual students. These include faculty teams of instructors spanning grades 8 and 9, as well as high school and college, to help align curricular expectations between middle and high school and between high school and college.

School principals and district staff are also part of PSJA's support structure. High school principals report that a culture has grown of working collaboratively with each other and with central office staff to problem solve and develop strategies for increasing student success. The district is attempting to further formalize the institutionalization of "College³" practices, having co-designed a principal training program and practicum with one of its college partners, The University of Texas-Pan American. The goal is to help build a pipeline of future school leaders with the unique instructional leadership and management skills needed to advance the strategies promoted by PSJA. Current staff who want to participate receive partial reimbursement for tuition costs from the district.

District leaders have also looked to and benefited from the support of Educate Texas—the statewide nonprofit working with multiple schools, districts, and colleges on readiness and success strategies—as a thought partner and critical friend to reinforce positive practices and troubleshoot issues. As a longtime Educate Texas colleague, Program Officer Alma Garcia, says, "Part of the intermediary role has been to help the district leaders to reflect and [to provide them with] feedback [about] what I'm seeing." In turn, Educate Texas and its national partner, Jobs for the Future, have learned lessons from PSJA's innovative work that the organizations disseminate through their networks in the field.

STRUCTURING AND STRENGTHENING COLLEGE PARTNERSHIPS

PSJA would be unable to promote the "College³" vision without strong partnerships with neighboring colleges, chief among them South Texas College, which is the region's primary community college. University of Texas-Pan American and Texas State Technical College also provide important support. The colleges have made important commitments to help PSJA implement the major activities to advance "College³."

Partner colleges and PSJA share data that drive much of the planning and triggering of supports provided to students. This has entailed the development of agreements compliant with the federal Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act, processes for data sharing, and the dedication of staff to do the labor-intensive technical work of transferring college files to a secure file sharing and reporting environment so that they can be linked with PSJA records and made available for analysis.

For PSJA students and parents taking college courses, South Texas College has made its campus resources and facilities accessible just as for other college students and issues them a student identification card. The official affiliation provides both physical access and an important psychological connection to the campus—making college tangible rather than a remote possibility.

These connections and benefits are further reinforced through formal agreements between South Texas College and PSJA for sharing campus space. Not only do high school students go to South Texas College campuses to take courses. “Regular”/non-dual enrollment students from South Texas College also come to PSJA high school campuses to take college courses after school hours, taking advantage of accessible classroom space and equipment. This sharing maximizes access to college courses and to PSJA and South Texas College capital resources. It also visibly extends the college’s reach into high schools.

The colleges have also had to determine with PSJA how to cover the costs of college courses for such a large number of high school students. Texas state policies permit colleges and school districts to claim state per-pupil enrollment funding for dual enrollees, which pays a significant part of the cost, but does not fully cover the costs of college course taking. PSJA and South Texas College have developed a sustainable cost-sharing arrangement to cover this gap. It relies on the use of stipends, rather than full tuition charges, for South Texas College faculty to teach sections of college courses for high school students and cost arrangements for when qualified PSJA high school faculty teach college courses.

These arrangements also account for the resources that the college needs to provide oversight of faculty and to cover administrative costs. Textbook costs are minimized through an agreement with the college to limit changes in textbook editions to every four years so that PSJA can hand down used books to new students taking college courses without needing to purchase new books every year.⁶

These South Texas College financing arrangements for dual enrollment are, in fact, provided to many other school districts in the region and are indicative of the college’s extensive outreach to and partnerships with high schools to help students make a strong transition into college. Although PSJA is organized to support students to capitalize maximally on South Texas College offerings, South Texas College is reaching many high school students beyond PSJA. In total, the college serves more than 13,000 high school students across the region annually through early college high schools and dual enrollment programs and academies.

South Texas College and PSJA also collaborate through faculty and staff who support students in the transition from high school to college—not only as dual enrollees but also as recent PSJA graduates. This includes information sharing and joint planning by PSJA transition counselors and South Texas College early college staff about scheduling, instructional calendars, TSI testing, and joint professional development for and planning by PSJA and college teachers.

There are signs that colleges are also incorporating practices that they are learning through their partnership with PSJA. This includes the participation of numerous South Texas College faculty in training sessions about the Common Instructional Framework and the creation of a new principal training program and practicum at the University of Texas-Pan American.

CONCLUSION

The story of PSJA provides a compelling glimpse into how high schools can take responsibility for students' postsecondary success beyond "getting them ready" for college, as well as the nature of the college partnerships needed to support a shared goal. PSJA's progress is the result of strong relationships that have been built between district and college leaders over many years, as well as strategic, methodical work to align systems in order to routinize support for an early college experience.

The work is not without challenges or costs. For example, it takes considerable time to negotiate roles and responsibilities between PSJA transition counselors and college staff so that they complement each other rather than duplicate services. Finding qualified high school faculty who can teach college courses requires continual and concerted effort, and PSJA is not yet reaching the intended scale. Implementing all of these strategies has costs and tradeoffs with other district functions within budget constraints. PSJA primarily has used existing district funds to pay for the costs of this work, including the college courses and textbooks, the training of its early college teachers, and the transition counselors. The costs have been largely sustained by shifting roles and responsibilities of existing staff rather than by using additional funding. Although the district has been resourceful in securing approximately \$3.5 million in private and federal grants over the last six years to jump start and accelerate its "College³" efforts, these dollars have been important but small in relation to PSJA's \$390 million annual operating budget.

In many respects, PSJA and its partners are exceptional. Superintendent King has been in the same district for seven years promoting this vision and these strategies. President Reed is the founding president of a relatively new community college (created in 1993) known for its innovation. Further, Texas' state policies are supportive of dual enrollment.

On the other hand, the fundamental strategies that the partners are using can and should be applied to some degree in any community within any state that possesses the vision and will. The progress that the partners have made is as much about a mindset at the leadership levels about the need to work across sectors so that every student is on some pathway to postsecondary education than it is about any one particular intervention.

PSJA's leaders are the first to say that they are humbled by the high ambition and day-to-day challenges of implementing their vision and still have much work to do to reach the "College³" goal for all. While that may be true, they are clearly headed in the right direction and have much to share with other communities interested in making a similar impact.

ENDNOTES

¹ The state defines “economically disadvantaged” as students eligible for free or reduced-priced lunch or other public assistance.

² Surveys of high schools and postsecondary institutions suggest that the number of high school students taking college courses grew from 812,700 in the 2002-03 school year to 1,413,500 in 2010-11.

³ Retrieved from Texas Education Agency on November 16, 2014. http://tea.texas.gov/news_release.aspx?id=25769815030

⁴ The Common Instructional Framework was developed by JFF and modeled on the practices evident in the University Park Campus School in Worcester. For several years, JFF and Educate Texas have worked in partnership to spread these practices to early college schools and districts across Texas.

⁵ TSI establishes the placement test scores needed in math, reading, and writing for students to be considered prepared for non-remedial college courses.

⁶ PSJA is also exploring alternate methods for saving on textbook costs including the possibility of getting online editions and renting texts.

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