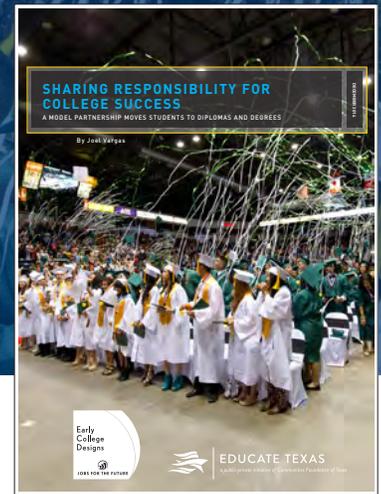


SHARING RESPONSIBILITY FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS

A MODEL PARTNERSHIP MOVES STUDENTS TO DIPLOMAS AND DEGREES

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



In order to prepare the large number of postsecondary-educated youth our economy demands, high schools and higher education must break through the boundaries that have traditionally separated them and assume joint responsibility for student success. This brief describes an unusual school district partnership with colleges that has achieved impressive results doing just that. By redefining the roles and responsibilities of secondary and postsecondary partners, educators in one of the nation's most impoverished areas have substantially increased college completion and career readiness for the region's young people. The strategies developed in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo (PSJA) Independent School District in South Texas offer exciting lessons for states and other communities about how—and why—to rethink the age-old systems that support the transition from high school to college completion.

The PSJA district serves 32,000 students in the Rio Grande Valley, near the U.S.-Mexico border. For the past seven years, under the leadership of Superintendent Daniel King, PSJA has worked intently with South Texas College and other partners toward a single goal: ensuring that every high school graduate is ready for college, connected to college, and, ultimately, able to complete college. PSJA has dubbed this “College Cubed” (College³). Since the collaboration began, high school graduation rates have soared 28 percent and thousands of PSJA students have earned significant college credit—for free. Hundreds of seniors each year are graduating with postsecondary credentials and degrees already in hand.

SECONDARY AND POSTSECONDARY PARTNERS PROVIDE EARLY COLLEGE FOR ALL

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

PSJA has taken this idea further, by creating and transforming several schools using an early college design.

The PSJA district currently offers four distinct designs, each incorporating meaningful tuition-free college courses that count toward a postsecondary degree or credential:

- **Standalone Early College High Schools:** Three schools offer every student the support and sequence of courses to earn up to 60 college credits or an Associate's degree along with their diploma; these include a small school for teenage parents, a 500-student STEM-focused school, and a large comprehensive high school that was converted into an early college.
- **Back on Track to College:** Two schools use a specialized early college model to serve students who have been identified as off-track for high school graduation or who at some point left school altogether.
- **Dual to Degree Pathways:** Three large, comprehensive high schools are redesigning grades 11 and 12 to provide dual enrollment opportunities for all of their students.

- **School Within a School Early College High Schools:** Small early college “learning communities” are under development inside the three comprehensive high schools that offer dual enrollment to all juniors and seniors.

STRATEGIES PROMOTE SHARED RESPONSIBILITY FOR STUDENT SUCCESS

While PSJA strives to provide some kind of early college experience to every student, the “College³” vision means more than simply taking college courses in high school. PSJA shares responsibility for student success with South Texas College and other postsecondary partners in several practical ways, all supporting students as they make the transition from high school to college.

Four key strategies align the daily work of high school and college staff with their goal of helping every student complete a postsecondary degree or credential. Examples of each strategy include:

- 1. Fostering shared ownership of the “College³” vision among students, teachers, counselors, principals, and district leaders.** For example, Superintendent King has groomed passionate and effective school leaders to take on larger roles, moving several from small early college programs to large comprehensive high schools that are adopting early college designs. Students take college placement tests in 8th grade and receive counseling about the meaning of the results.
- 2. Creating new roles and responsibilities for PSJA and South Texas College staff.** For example, PSJA hired a college readiness director who previously was high school

program director at South Texas College. In addition, South Texas College employs a liaison to all of the institution’s early college partnerships with area high schools.

- 3. Aligning district systems and services in support of students and staff.** For example, the district has co-designed a principal training program and practicum with the University of Texas-Pan American to help build a pipeline of future leaders with the instructional leadership and management skills needed to promote college completion strategies. Every high school has established an early-warning system using data to monitor individual progress and trigger required interventions when GPA falls below a certain level.
- 4. Structuring and strengthening college partnerships.** King and South Texas College President Shirley Reed have worked together from the beginning, building on the success of their first collaboration, an early college high school to get students back on track to graduation. To maximize student access and support, their joint work has involved sharing facilities and making financial arrangements to discount textbook costs and help cover the costs of tuition.

CONCLUSION

The success of PSJA does not have to be—and nor should it be allowed to become—an anomaly. 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 is as much about a mindset among leaders about the need to work across sectors than it is about any particular intervention. Their ideals and their actions have led to unusually strong student outcomes and provide an example that more districts and colleges should emulate.



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