



Leadership Lessons from the Early College Expansion Partnership



JOBS FOR THE FUTURE



EDUCATE TEXAS

a public-private initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas

By Sarah Hooker • April 2017



Jobs for the Future (JFF) is a national nonprofit that builds educational and economic opportunity for underserved populations in the United States. JFF develops innovative programs and public policies that increase college readiness and career success and build a more highly skilled, competitive workforce. With over 30 years of experience, JFF is a recognized national leader in bridging education and work to increase economic mobility and strengthen our economy. Learn more at www.jff.org.



EDUCATE TEXAS

a public-private initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas

Educate Texas, an initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas, has established a robust public-private partnership that has aligned key stakeholders within the K-12 public and higher education systems. With the goal of increasing the number of low-income, minority, and first-generation students who will graduate from high school and attain a postsecondary credential (two-year, four-year, or technical postsecondary education), Educate Texas is pursuing the following vision: strengthen the public and higher education systems so that every Texas student is prepared for educational and workforce success. Educate Texas' mission is to increase postsecondary readiness, access, and success for all students by building partnerships, leading innovation, and scaling practices and policies.

With Texas workforce projections suggesting that 60% of adults will need a postsecondary credential by 2030 to be gainfully employed, Educate Texas has identified four areas of focus: college and career readiness, higher education, regional collaboration, and effective teaching. By implementing a collaborative approach with both public and private partners, Educate Texas identifies high potential innovations, pilots the efforts to determine which strategies could benefit the entire education system, and then replicates and scales those found to be most impactful.

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INTRODUCTION

While early college high schools were initially envisioned as small, self-contained schools providing academic acceleration, college course taking, and postsecondary transition support for students from underserved backgrounds, a growing number of education leaders are scaling up early colleges in an effort to improve the performance of entire school systems.¹ Early college designs have flourished as they have accumulated evidence of their effectiveness in raising high school graduation and college success rates over the past 15 years.² Across the country, local districts, community colleges, intermediary organizations, and funders have joined forces to create entire districts of early college high schools, launching thousands more students toward postsecondary credential completion. Widening the lens from a “small schools” model to a districtwide reform strategy requires more than a minor adjustment in focus; it requires leaders to take on the daunting work of systems-level change.

This brief explores the leadership of a large-scale effort to expand early college designs districtwide—the Early College Expansion Partnership (ECEP), funded by a five-year Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) grant from the U.S. Department of Education in 2012. Three school districts, which already had implemented early college designs to varying degrees, embarked upon an ambitious plan to bring early college to an additional 30,000 students in South Texas and Denver. Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District and Brownsville Independent School District in Texas, along with Denver Public Schools, each committed to transforming large, comprehensive high schools into early colleges and providing all students with opportunities to earn transferable college credits and, in some cases, certificates or associate’s degrees, by the time of their high school graduation.³ Intermediaries Jobs for the Future (JFF) and Educate Texas have served as fellow strategists, technical assistance providers, and coaches, and all partners have learned important lessons about what it takes to effect change across entire systems.

Building the foundation necessary to bring college courses into all of a district's high schools requires simultaneous efforts across a diverse set of system-wide functions, including instructional support, curricular alignment, human resources, counseling, and budgeting, as well as offices overseeing career and technical education (CTE), to name a few. The success of early college expansion also hinges on the strength of district partnerships with postsecondary institutions. Redesigning the high school experience to incorporate dual enrollment opportunities for all students requires leaders from both sides of the secondary-postsecondary divide who are willing to disrupt business as usual and rethink the boundaries between high school and college. As the ECEP districts are approaching the end of the i3 grant, one of the overarching lessons learned is that scaling early college depends on effective leadership at multiple levels, with actors throughout the system who understand and embrace their roles and share accountability for making essential changes in policy and practice.

Seeking to better understand the successes, challenges, and lessons learned during the i3 grant, JFF has been engaged in documenting the experiences of the ECEP districts and intermediary partners. To inform this brief, JFF conducted in-person and phone-based interviews with approximately 50 stakeholders during fall 2016 and winter 2017. Interviewees from each site included the superintendent, deputies and other senior district administrators, managers of district divisions and offices responsible for various components of early college implementation, district instructional coaches, external instructional and leadership coaches, a sample of principals and assistant principals, and liaisons from partnering higher education institutions. JFF also examined relevant district data, reports, and policies, as well as related prior literature.

This brief attempts to unearth helpful insights for other districts regarding the type of leadership needed to shepherd such an audacious systems change effort.

The paper begins with a short review of literature to differentiate among the leadership styles displayed in the ECEP districts. Brief case studies of each site demonstrate the varied approaches of central office leaders, including superintendents and mid-level district administrators, and illustrate significant contextual factors that inevitably influence their choices. The paper includes a discussion of school-level leadership development, a critical factor as districts scale from one early college school to many. The final section offers reflections on the strengths and risks of various leadership practices and decision-making structures, along with recommendations for other leaders contemplating early college expansion in their own districts.

JFF and Educate Texas have identified four key recommendations for change managers embarking on or supporting the scale-up of early college designs across large systems. While these relatively straightforward tenets may apply broadly to leadership of other school improvement efforts, this paper demonstrates their unique role in early college expansion. The recommendations are:

- Communicate a coherent vision and clear goals that are widely understood.
- Foster broad ownership and develop teams that share leadership responsibilities.
- Develop governance structures to maximize the interconnected efforts of all partners.
- Promote accountability for implementation by clearly identifying the changes that district administrators should expect to see.

The Early College Expansion Partnership

This paper is part of a series describing lessons learned from the Early College Expansion Partnership (ECEP), a five-year initiative funded by an Investing in Innovation Fund (i3) grant from the U.S. Department of Education in 2012. The grant, now in its final year, has two main goals: (1) to scale up early college designs as system-wide secondary school improvement and college-readiness strategies for all students in three school districts in South Texas and Denver, and (2) to position early college designs for sustainability and further scale-up within South Texas, metropolitan Denver, and beyond.

The Partners

The ECEP includes three diverse school systems—Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District (PSJA), Brownsville Independent School District (BISD), and the Denver Public Schools (DPS)—as well as Jobs for the Future and Educate Texas, intermediary organizations with long track records of developing and supporting early college designs.

The Premise

The initiative's "early college for all" approach is based on the premise that all students, regardless of prior academic performance, can achieve college readiness with sufficient academic and social support, engaging instructional practices, strong postsecondary partnerships, and sequences of courses aligned with their postsecondary goals. All sites have received coaching to implement the Common Instructional Framework,⁴ a set of six high-engagement, research-based strategies for college readiness developed by JFF for early college high schools nationwide.

The Role of 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 and assisted with the development and strengthening of postsecondary partnerships and degree and certificate pathways. JFF leadership coaches have worked with the principals of each participating school to guide

the transformation of instruction, curriculum, and school culture. JFF has also partnered with Educate Texas and the participating districts to conduct professional development institutes for administrators, teachers, and counselors. In Denver, JFF instructional coaches have provided ongoing training for a team of district instructional coaches, who in turn deliver intensive, personalized coaching for cohorts of teachers at each school. JFF also convened a "community of practice" to facilitate peer learning and sharing of best practices across districts.

The Role of Educate Texas

Educate Texas, an initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas, has established a robust public-private partnership that has aligned key stakeholders within the K-12 public and higher education systems. With Texas workforce projections suggesting that 60% of adults will need a postsecondary credential by 2030 to be gainfully employed, Educate Texas has identified four areas of focus: college and career readiness, higher education, regional collaboration, and effective teaching. Educate Texas has supported the districtwide implementation of early college in PSJA since 2008. As part of the ECEP, Educate Texas has played a central role in technical assistance in PSJA and Brownsville. The local project lead provided frequent advising for district administrators. Educate Texas staff also delivered leadership coaching for the early college high school directors (a role filled by an assistant principal at each participating high school), as well as instructional coaching for teachers and internal coaches hired by the districts. Throughout the project, Educate Texas has helped both districts and their postsecondary partners build the capacity to collect, share, and analyze student data and use it to drive shared decision making.

Why Early College High Schools?

The evidence base on the effectiveness of early college high schools is robust and growing. Early college designs have demonstrated strong results in individual schools for nearly 15 years. Scaling up early college to make it available for all students in a school district is a far more complex undertaking, however. It will take several more years to see the full scope of the impact. Previous data on student outcomes show:



Preliminary Outcomes from Early College Expansion

A third-party evaluation of the ECEP's implementation and impact is in progress.⁸ It will measure outcomes for the graduating classes of 2017—the cohorts of students who were in 9th grade during Year 2 of the grant and who therefore had the chance to benefit from the entire early college high school experience. Each of the i3 schools in the three districts started work at very different stages in 2012-13, in terms of their prior academic achievement and their experience with (and infrastructure for) dual enrollment. Nonetheless, the early college schools have shown promising results across all sites. The following data points offer a snapshot of their progress:

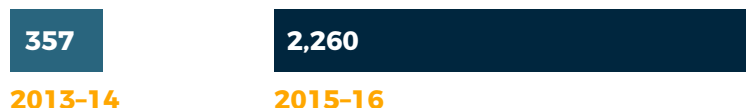
PSJA

Graduates who earned an associate's degree with their high school diploma



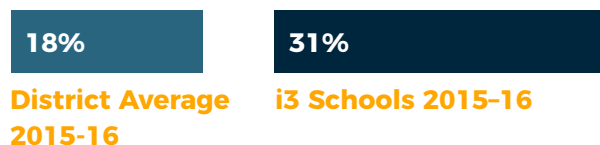
Brownsville

Number of students taking dual enrollment and Advanced Placement classes in the i3 high schools



Denver

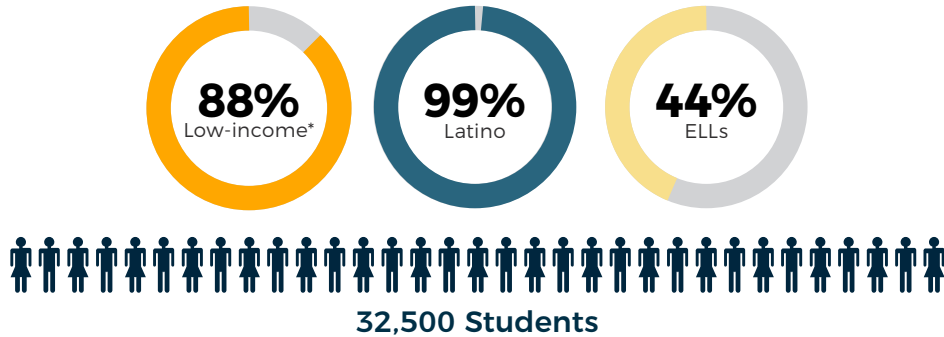
Students who participated in dual enrollment courses



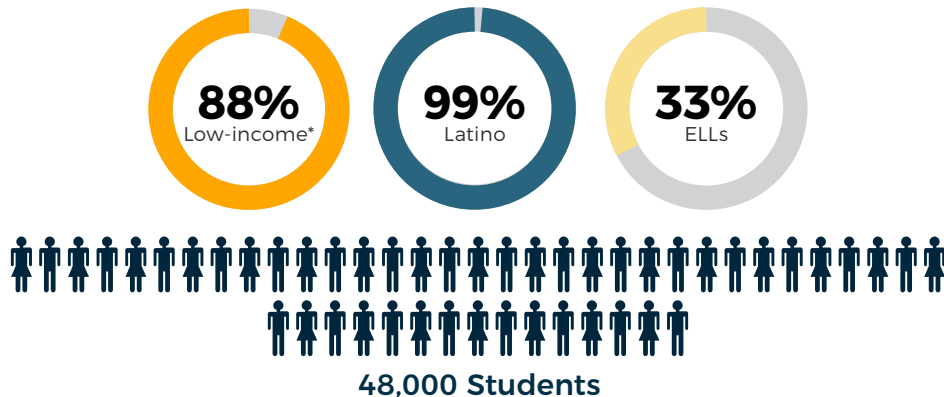
Three School Districts, Three Contexts for Change

All three districts in the ECEP enroll a disproportionately large share of students from low-income backgrounds and other groups that are underrepresented in higher education, including a high share of English language learners (ELLs). Aside from these commonalities, the districts have striking differences:

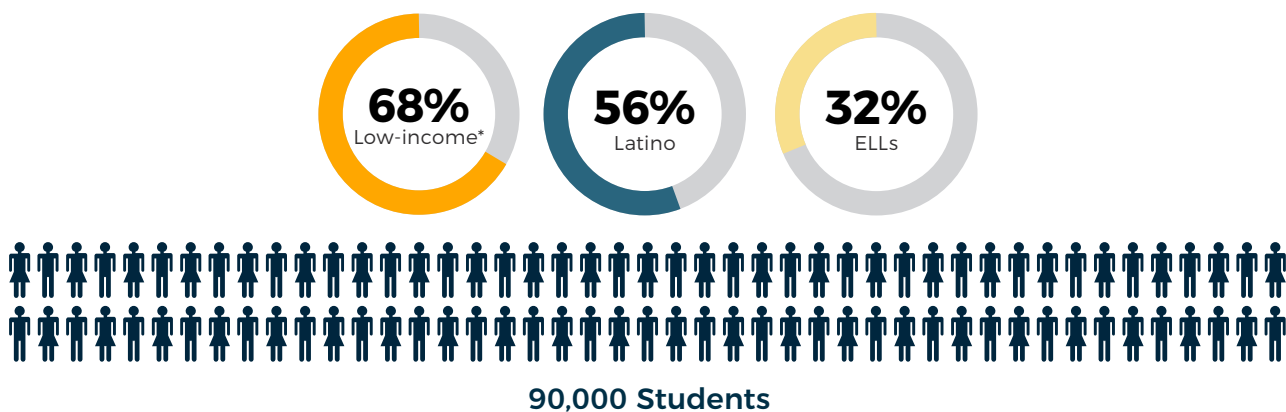
Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District (TX)⁹



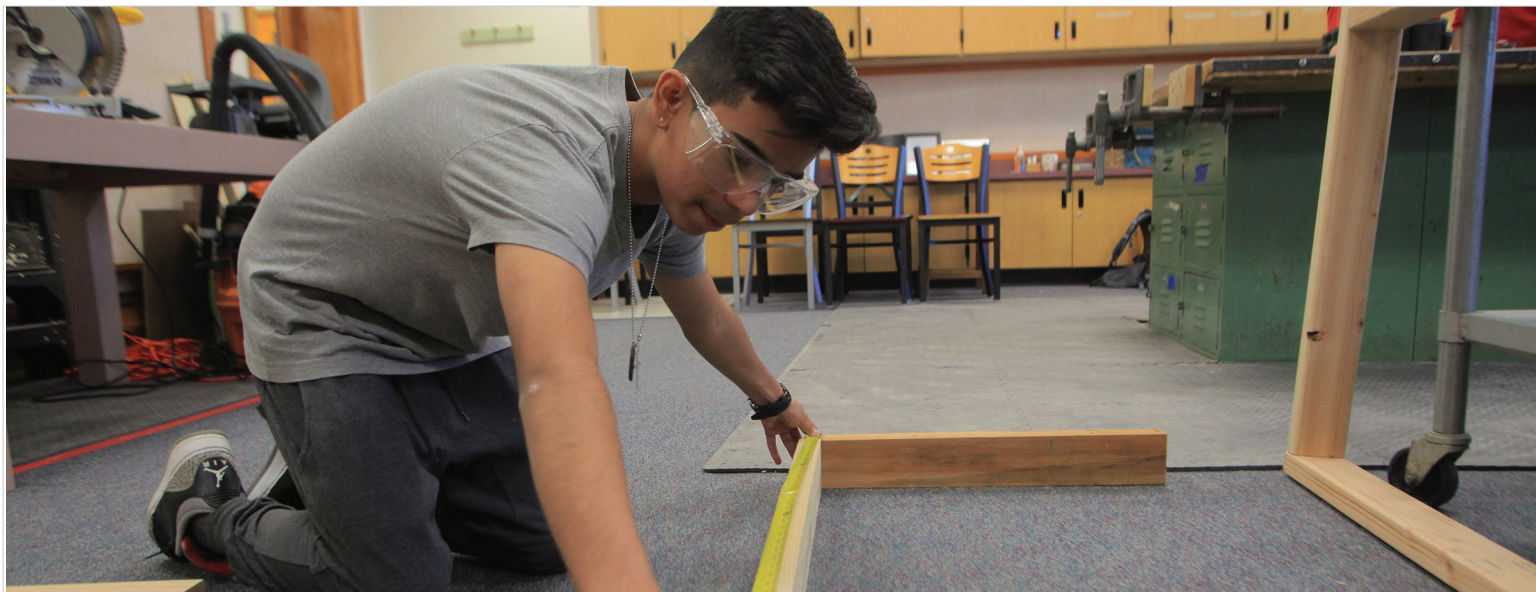
Brownsville Independent School District (TX)¹⁰



Denver Public Schools (CO)¹¹



*Refers to economically disadvantaged students, whose family incomes qualify for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program.



EDUCATION LEADERSHIP FOR CHANGE: WHAT THE RESEARCH TELLS US

A wide body of scholarship has been devoted to the types of leadership needed to reform education systems. Applied in the context of early college expansion, literature on education leadership can help superintendents and their deputies reflect on how to inspire commitment in early college designs, build a sense of shared ownership, delegate responsibilities, and empower actors at lower levels in the organizational structure. Principals, meanwhile, draw on a similar body of research as they face the task of building a leadership team that has the capacity and dedication needed for the challenging work of transforming their schools into early colleges. At least four types of leadership that are frequently described in literature—transformational leadership, distributed leadership, systems leadership, and leadership from the middle—are relevant to the work of early college expansion in South Texas and Denver.

For more than two decades, education researchers and reformers have been interested in the concept of “transformational leadership,” which refers to the ability of a single leader to communicate a clear vision for improvement, motivate followers, and persuade others to act.¹² Visionary school principals and district superintendents are often characterized by a transformational style of leadership. More recently, many researchers interested in school system improvement

have widened their lenses to focus on the combined leadership roles of entire groups of administrators. “Distributed leadership” models focus on empowering a broader cadre of individuals within a school or district to share ownership of, and responsibility for, a desired change.¹³ Using a distributed leadership lens, efforts to transform a school must extend beyond the development of the principal; similarly, superintendents have a vested interest in building the capacity of leaders throughout the organization. The concept of “systems leadership” takes into consideration and aims to affect all of the interrelated components of a system that each play a role in achieving a common social benefit.¹⁴ Systems leaders help others understand the interconnected impacts of their work on a larger goal and adopt shared strategies to increase their effectiveness.¹⁵

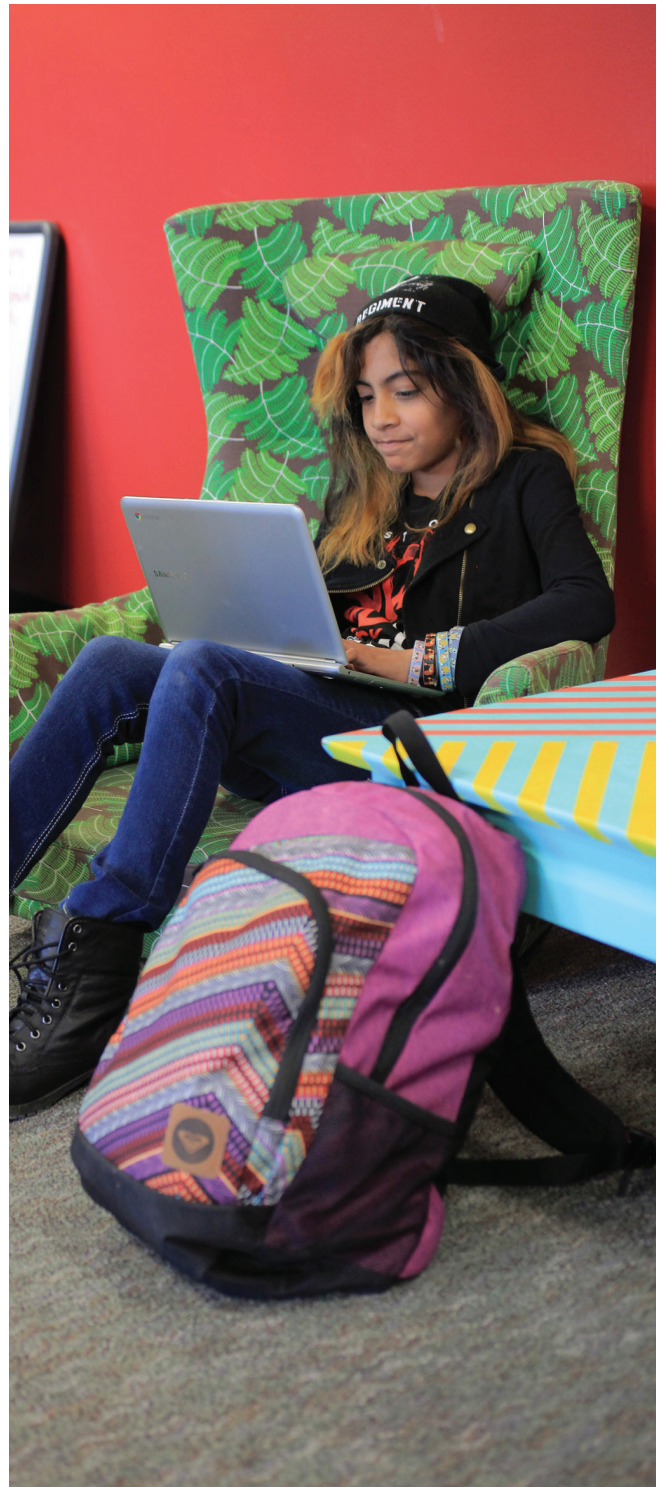
The importance of mid-level leadership in carrying out a reform agenda cannot be overstated. Managers between the superintendent and principals, such as districtwide college readiness directors or managers of counseling services, are responsible for operationalizing the vision and goals established at the top, as well as guiding school-level leaders and responding to local needs. Education reform theorist Michael Fullan defines leadership from the middle as “a deliberate strategy that increases the capacity and internal coherence of the

The importance of mid-level leadership in carrying out a reform agenda cannot be overstated.

middle as it becomes a more effective partner upward ... and downward to its schools and communities, in pursuit of greater system performance.”¹⁶

School systems that are taking on the complex work of scaling early colleges provide a unique laboratory to observe examples of all of these different leadership styles and practices. Becoming an early college district requires a wide range of stakeholders to commit to a particular vision of change, promote learning and adaptation throughout the organization, and engage partners such as postsecondary institutions and intermediaries in coordinated efforts focused on a common goal of college course-taking for all students.

The following case studies demonstrate the crucial roles played by leaders at multiple levels in each district’s organizational structure. To claim that each district exemplified only one leadership archetype would be an oversimplification. Nonetheless, a few general narratives emerge when comparing the districts. In PSJA, the early college story began with a superintendent with a transformational style and a guiding vision, implemented in a highly centralized fashion. In Brownsville, the role of consistent early college champion and resourceful change manager was played by an assistant superintendent, and her influence increased under the leadership of a supportive superintendent. At the same time, both PSJA and Brownsville implemented a governance structure—called the “i3 Cabinet”—that reflected a systems leadership approach by bringing together all internal leaders and external partners involved in the early college effort. In Denver, meanwhile, the district’s size and decentralized organizational structure lent themselves to distributive leadership and the emergence of influential leadership from the middle.





LEADERSHIP IN PSJA

Historical Context

Prior to the Early College Expansion Partnership, PSJA had already garnered a national reputation for success in scaling early college high schools. For nearly 10 years, PSJA has used early college as its primary strategy for raising graduation rates and promoting college course enrollment and success—significant goals in a region that historically has had low educational attainment among adults and limited opportunities for economic mobility. JFF and Educate Texas have supported the design and scale up of early college pathways in PSJA through their longstanding roles as strategic advisers, and JFF previously documented the district's efforts and impressive outcomes in *Launching Early College Districtwide*¹⁷ and *Sharing Responsibility for College Success*.¹⁸

PSJA initially implemented early college as a “back on track” model at an alternative school serving former dropouts in 2007, then created a small, STEM-focused early college in 2008 to serve as an incubator for expanding early college designs to other schools. The district began implementing early college in larger, comprehensive high schools in 2010, often starting with school-within-a-school designs, later scaled up to become wall-to-wall early college high schools, beginning with the ninth and tenth grades.

Using the i3 grant, PSJA expanded early college designs into the district's two remaining comprehensive high schools that did not have an early college focus and also supported their four feeder middle schools in implementing college-preparatory instructional strategies and building a college-going culture. By spring 2015, all of PSJA's comprehensive high schools had been officially designated as early college high schools by the Texas Education Agency.¹⁹ The district's principal postsecondary partner, South Texas College, located in McAllen, is widely recognized as one of the largest providers of dual enrollment in Texas and the nation, offering courses to over 14,000 high school students from 22 districts in 2016.²⁰

Transformational Leadership from the Top

PSJA Superintendent Dr. Daniel P. King has earned a longstanding reputation as an early college visionary. He introduced early college designs to PSJA when he arrived 10 years ago, after leading the expansion of early college as superintendent in nearby Hidalgo, a much smaller community a few miles to the south. He has played a pathbreaking role ever since. The district adopted the motto “College Cubed” (written as “College³” and shorthand for “College Ready, College Connected, and College Complete”), and it remains the top priority, with the message displayed

prominently at all school sites, including at the elementary level.²¹ Many of the stakeholders interviewed for this report credited much of PSJA's deliberate and steady progress expanding early college high schools to King's longtime, consistent leadership. His tenure is almost unheard of among superintendents, who stay an average of three years in the job, and its significance cannot be overstated.

District administrators, principals, and college staff all noted King's unwavering focus on building the capacity and community support necessary to grow and sustain early college designs. In PSJA, there is no doubt that early college implementation has been driven at the highest administrative level. Indeed, as one school administrator described, in order to be successful, principals in PSJA "have to believe the way he [King] believes and see the same vision."

During King's tenure, PSJA has centralized and standardized many operations that previously varied across schools, including professional development, curricula, and counseling.²² As with any major systemwide reform, some educators initially resisted the perceived intrusion on their schools' instructional approach, but the superintendent and other senior district leaders have built buy-in over several years. King acknowledges the substantial role that the district's central office has played in leading early college expansion, from planning future dual enrollment course offerings to designing a consistent tutoring model for struggling students across all high schools. From his perspective, scaling up requires "moving toward system-level direction and decision-making" to maximize assets, address common barriers, and implement interventions that will have an impact on the entire district's outcomes. Observers have noted that mobilizing financial resources to support college course taking has proven somewhat less challenging in PSJA than in other districts, likely due to early college's status at the top of King's list of priorities.

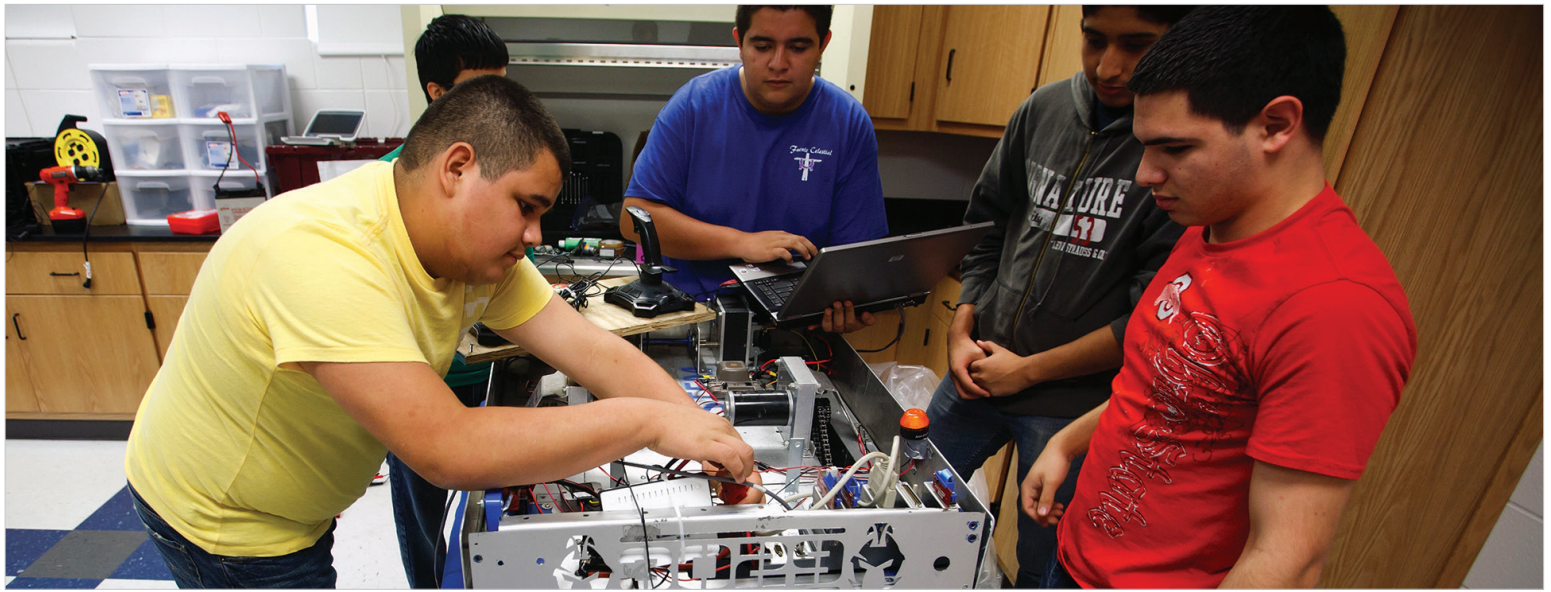
King has delegated day-to-day oversight of aspects of early college implementation to members of his cabinet and senior administrative team. The project lead on the i3 grant, Deputy Superintendent Dr. Narciso Garcia, is able to have much more hands-on involvement with implementation of the various components of dual

enrollment, instructional change, and student support than the superintendent, and Garcia's relative seniority in the district lends weight to his direction. For instance, Garcia is deeply engaged in maintaining the district's relationship with its primary postsecondary partner, and is able to liaise with the college's senior vice presidents or deans whenever necessary to address problems or capacity challenges and to propose new solutions.

Systems Leadership and Distributive Governance: The i3 Cabinet

Like other large-scale initiatives that depend on coordinated actions across an entire system or region, early college expansion requires school districts, postsecondary partners, and other intermediary organizations to establish regular communication and decision-making processes. A key component of the ECEP logic model was the development of an "i3 Cabinet," a governance body that brings together key regional leaders for regular meetings to collaboratively set goals, review progress toward benchmarks, and agree upon common strategies. Membership includes representatives of the superintendent's office, district administrators, principals, and other administrators from early college schools, as well as representatives of the partner colleges.

Each of the South Texas districts has an active i3 Cabinet. Deputy Superintendent Garcia leads these meetings in PSJA, and he consults closely with the project lead from Educate Texas for advice on meeting agendas and priorities. The cabinet meetings have been expanded to include all middle and high school principals—not just the six schools participating in the i3 grant—because they offer a rare chance for school leaders to learn from and strategize with one another on their efforts to promote college and career readiness. In the past few years, the cabinets have also formed workgroups focused on various topics including data analysis, student support, and instructional transformation, which pull together administrators and staff with deep expertise in each area. Along with the broader i3 Cabinet, these workgroups provide the infrastructure needed for systems leadership and implementation of a multifaceted, multiyear reform.



LEADERSHIP IN BROWNSVILLE

Historical Context

Brownsville has had one small, high-performing early college high school for nearly a decade. Five years ago, the district decided to transform all six of its large, comprehensive high schools into early colleges. The district selected three high schools to participate in the i3 grant, along with their six feeder middle schools. By 2014, all six comprehensive high schools in BISD had received state designation as early colleges. Brownsville dealt with a major change in its postsecondary partnerships early in the grant period, as the former University of Texas at Brownsville-Texas Southmost College split into two separate institutions in 2013. The newly independent community college, Texas Southmost College, has faced leadership changes and is still in the process of resolving accreditation issues affecting the maximum number of credits high school students can earn through dual enrollment.²³ This instability slowed the rollout of degree and certificate pathways at the early college high schools in Brownsville, though dual enrollment participation has grown substantially in the past few years. The district has also developed strong partnerships with Texas A&M University-Kingsville and the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley.

Central Office Leadership and the Role of Determined Deputies

In Brownsville, the impetus for joining the i3 grant originated with Assistant Superintendent of Curriculum and Instruction Berta Peña, who has remained a steadfast driver of early college expansion throughout the grant period. The continuity she provided was particularly important, given that Brownsville experienced a superintendent transition and a shift in college partners during the grant's second year. While changes at the top may have affected the initial pace of early college implementation, the new superintendent, Dr. Esperanza Zendejas, affirmed her commitment to carrying out the scope of work laid out in the i3 grant as soon as she took over. The superintendent's strong support reinforced the direction Assistant Superintendent Peña had begun and helped instill a sense of urgency around the grant's objectives. In the words of Zendejas, "The role of the superintendent is critical to make sure everybody's on-board.... Superintendents need to be cheerleaders; they're the folks who drive the agenda, knowing that lots of other people do the work behind the scenes."

Assistant Superintendent Peña has served as the project lead on the grant and leader of Brownville's i3 Cabinet. She has earned a reputation as a leader who “gets things done” and brokers “clever solutions” in the face of resource constraints, which are a fact of life in Brownsville. For example, Peña has developed a multipronged strategy to maximize the number of high school teachers with the qualifications to serve as college instructors for dual enrollment courses. BISD now provides incentives for dual enrollment teachers to offer college courses after school or on Saturdays so that students from multiple schools can participate and take advantage of the limited supply of qualified teachers. The district also has developed a partnership with the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley to provide subsidized opportunities for more teachers to earn the graduate-level credits needed to teach dual enrollment courses. Concerned with the high cost to the district of purchasing college textbooks, Peña directed staff to create an inventory system to share resources across schools and conserve spending. These examples demonstrate Peña's resourcefulness, her dogged commitment to early college expansion, and her willingness to use her influence to remove roadblocks.

Many of the components of early college implementation in Brownsville are now housed in the Office of Advanced Academics, under the leadership of Administrator Merrill Hammons. Hammons and his team manage postsecondary partnerships, dual enrollment course-taking, college counseling, college-readiness testing, and extensive interventions for students not passing the required assessments to take college courses in core subjects. Hammons is deeply familiar with the complexity of early college expansion and the work required to coordinate across various departments and programs within BISD. He holds monthly meetings with all early college high school directors—assistant principals who are responsible for overseeing key design components at the campus level—as well as another set of monthly meetings with middle and high school counselors, and the overall i3 Cabinet meetings. Hammons has also focused on building stronger connections between the middle and high schools,

engaging counselors from both levels in raising students' and parents' awareness of dual enrollment and CTE options. In Hammons' own words, the varied activities under his purview are all focused on “putting processes in place to make sure everyone is on the same page, and the work is sustained.”





LEADERSHIP IN DENVER

Historical Context

Denver Public Schools, which has nearly 40 high schools, has also had one longtime standout in dual enrollment—the Career Education Center Early College High School—which began as a magnet program and has since grown into a wall-to-wall, state-designated early college high school focused on CTE. Throughout the district, individual high schools had established dual enrollment partnerships with a variety of postsecondary institutions in the Denver metropolitan area prior to the beginning of the i3 grant. Today the district has 23 postsecondary partners, with the largest numbers of dual enrollment courses held through the Community College of Denver, Community College of Aurora, University of Colorado Denver, Red Rocks Community College, and Arapahoe Community College. Nine high schools were chosen to participate in the grant, along with six feeder middle schools.

Decentralization as a Senior Leadership Strategy

In Denver Public Schools, the central office has played a more discrete role in decisionmaking—an intentional aspect of the leadership strategy of Superintendent Dr. Tom Boasberg, who has been at the helm since 2009. The school board and senior district leadership have

granted considerable autonomy to principals for years, and in fall 2016 Boasberg released a broader plan for decentralization entitled *Equity and Empowerment: The School as the Unit of Change*.²⁴ According to the strategy set forth in this plan, schools have considerable discretion over hiring, managing budgets, conducting professional development, and accepting grants. This approach is intended to “further school-level empowerment and ownership of critical decisions.”

Denver’s interest in participating in the i3 grant originated with Superintendent Boasberg, who was familiar with the well-documented benefits of early college high schools, as well as with JFF’s history in supporting early college designs. Early college expansion fit well within the district’s strategic plan, the *Denver Plan 2020*, which establishes college and career readiness as one of five overarching goals.²⁵ Boasberg has emphasized the important and challenging task of developing strong pathways that prepare all students for both postsecondary education and the workforce, while also allowing students to tailor their studies to their specific goals and interests. Unlike in the Texas districts, where system leaders decided which schools would be part of the i3 grant, DPS asked schools to submit applications to participate. Boasberg thought this would encourage local buy-in for the reform. Boasberg also believes in piloting new approaches in a subset of schools and learning through their experiences before implementing sweeping changes districtwide.

Managing from the Middle

Superintendent Boasberg recognizes the unique value added by mid-level leaders in driving early college expansion in his district. In his words, “You need people who can think systemically but also are close enough to the real world of what’s happening inside schools. Ideas may sound good in theory,” but leaders need to bring a practical understanding of the everyday concerns of schools. Boasberg delegated primary oversight of the i3 grant to Dr. Antwan Wilson, then assistant superintendent for postsecondary readiness, who in turn asked the Office of College and Career Readiness to manage the initiative. OCCR Executive Director Dr. Bernard McCune was credited with establishing a strong foundation for early college schools before both he and Wilson left the district in 2014. The new executive director of OCCR, Dr. Kim Poast, brought strong experience in higher education.

Within the OCCR, the role of project lead for Denver’s multifaceted early college expansion efforts was carried out by Early College Director Loan Maas for most of the grant period. Maas was responsible for liaising with external partners as well as senior leaders from other departments in the district, and for managing a team of district instructional coaches who were each assigned to work with specific schools in the i3 grant. Unfortunately, Denver schools experienced a devastating loss when Maas passed away unexpectedly in fall 2016, leaving a significant hole in the early college infrastructure.

In many ways, Maas exemplified the strategy of leading from the middle. Other stakeholders in the district consistently describe her as a leader who had an extensive knowledge base and the persistence to push against practices that needed to change to better support the early college transformation. Maas spearheaded the complicated process of developing unique, articulated degree and certificate pathways with each of the i3 high schools and their college partners. In an effort to nurture the relationships between the district and the postsecondary partners, Maas also implemented a weekly one-on-one meeting with the dual enrollment director from one of the largest local colleges. As this individual recalls: “We had a trust and a respect for each other’s

institutions, and we knew we were advocating across systems. We had great rapport, and we did so much together in a few years.”

Internally, Maas guided her team of instructional coaches to provide customized support to each school in their caseload, based on each site’s professional development strategy as well as its culture, strengths, and areas of needed improvement. In this way, OCCR’s approach to implementation reflected the district’s broader philosophy of flexibility and local autonomy. At the same time, a team of college liaisons led by a concurrent enrollment manager—also housed in OCCR—supported individual high schools in navigating the processes of college placement testing, admissions, and course registration.

In light of the district’s size and organizational structure, DPS took a different approach to i3 Cabinet meetings. Instead of forming a new governance system just for early college expansion, DPS incorporated regular agenda items about the grant’s progress into existing, regularly scheduled meetings of district administrators and separate meetings of high school principals. OCCR also communicated with each partner college on a regular basis. This approach avoided the administrative burden of a new monthly commitment for senior staff and was more practical given the large number of postsecondary institutions in Denver and the occasional competition among these players. A downside, however, may have been reduced clarity of purpose and a lost opportunity for DPS to engage the colleges in cross-systems strategic planning and decision making.

Nonetheless, the appetite for dual enrollment has grown considerably in Denver during the last few years. In an effort to sustain and grow college course-taking opportunities, Poast and her staff proposed—and a community committee approved—an \$8 million funding package for college and career readiness as part of a comprehensive public education funding measure on the November 2016 local ballot. Voters signaled their support by passing the measure and advancing the longevity of dual enrollment, college counseling, and career pathways.



SCHOOL-LEVEL LEADERSHIP ACROSS DISTRICTS

Perhaps the most important ingredient for a successful early college high school expansion is innovative school-level leadership focused on improvement. Throughout the ECEP sites, leaders of large, comprehensive high schools were faced with the task of rethinking instructional strategies, course offerings, academic interventions, and data monitoring in order to bring college course taking to a much wider group of students. These leadership functions require the engagement and expertise of more than one individual. At the school level, distributed leadership involves building a leadership team—including principals, assistant principals, and, in some cases, deans and department heads—that shares ownership and responsibility for the goal of postsecondary readiness and college course taking for all students.

The development of school leaders was identified as a central component of the i3 grant's logic model. The principal of each participating school was assigned an external coach from JFF. In the South Texas districts, Educate Texas has provided additional leadership

coaching for early college high school directors at each campus since the second year of the grant. The concept of leadership coaching is supported by research that demonstrates the effectiveness of long-term, job-embedded professional development on building instructional capacity and giving leaders the tools they need to spearhead instructional change.²⁶ As articulated by Pascale et al., when schools adopt a culture of learning and continuous improvement for adults, “The leader becomes a context setter, the designer of a learning experience—not an authority figure with solutions.”²⁷

All of the ECEP leadership coaches bring decades of career expertise as principals, district administrators, and, in some cases, superintendents of other school systems. The coaches visit their schools on a monthly basis, and some coaches give principals assignments to complete between visits as well as readings on leadership theory. Initially, some of the principals were dubious about the need for leadership coaching, as many had been in their positions for a long time. The coaches emphasized that their role was not evaluative

“If someday I leave, we have built that capacity, and anyone can walk in my shoes. It’s about developing future leaders.”

or punitive. Rather, they explained that coaching provided an opportunity for principals to reflect on their leadership practice and their schools' progress with an external adviser who had deep experience tackling similar challenges in different contexts. Coaches have helped principals with navigating the complexities of early college designs; identifying areas of alignment with their other district priorities and mandates; building buy-in among teachers, students, and communities; and reviewing trend data. Some school leaders have become more proactive about using their coaches. For instance, a few South Texas principals reached out to their coach voluntarily during the summer break for feedback on the agenda for back-to-school trainings for their leadership teams.

A primary emphasis of professional development for both teachers and leaders is the Common Instructional Framework (CIF), a set of six instructional strategies developed by JFF that have proven effective in preparing students for college. With support from external partners, each district has held professional development institutes specifically for the leadership teams of the i3 schools. External coaches also conduct classroom walk-throughs with principals—and, in many cases, assistant principals and deans—and the coaches model best practices for providing meaningful feedback to teachers on their use of CIF strategies. Educate Texas added an additional layer of support for the South Texas districts by hiring a CIF implementation facilitator, whose exclusive focus is to assist principals and leadership teams in honing their abilities to conduct walk-throughs in an effort to increase schoolwide accountability for implementation of these strategies. Leadership and instructional coaches also reinforce the practice of “instructional rounds,” in which teams of colleagues conduct structured observations of one another's teaching and then provide constructive feedback during a debrief session.

School leadership styles vary across sites within each district, and this brief does not attempt to capture a detailed picture of all of the school leaders across the i3 grant sites. This paper highlights one short case example of school-level leadership, acknowledging that there

are many more examples of exceptional principals and administrators who have achieved notable success in a short time period.

Case Study in School-Level Leadership

PSJA Early College High School is one of the district's four large, comprehensive high schools and was the most recent school to complete the conversion to a wall-to-wall early college design. The school received state designation as an early college high school in spring 2015, and has already demonstrated some of the strongest outcomes in the South Texas region. Among the Class of 2016, 66 students graduated with a postsecondary certificate, and 42 graduated with a full associate's degree.

Principal Alejandro Elias came to the school in 2013-14, and has since led the school community in a cultural change that emphasizes high expectations for educators and students. As part of the challenge of rapidly scaling up early college designs, Principal Elias and Early College Director Rowdy Vela have had to constantly focus on increasing the number of teachers qualified to teach dual enrollment course sections in order to keep up with growing demand and the increased number of students passing the college-readiness assessments required to take college courses (known as the Texas Success Initiative, or TSI). The school has also implemented a wide range of innovative supports to help students prepare to pass the TSI. As one example, Elias charged the math faculty with developing a smartphone app to allow students to complete TSI tutorials from home on their own time.

Elias is known for his team-oriented approach to instructional leadership; all five of his assistant principals play a role in conducting classroom walk-throughs on a weekly basis, and all have been trained in identifying and providing feedback on CIF implementation. Elias has asked his JFF leadership coach to work with his whole leadership team so that, in his own words, “If someday I leave, we have built that capacity, and anyone can walk in my shoes. It's about developing future leaders.”



EMERGING LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Lessons

As with any ambitious change strategy, using early college designs to transform large high schools and entire districts depends on system-wide buy-in, which is reinforced by leadership. Districts working toward the same overall goals exemplify diverse leadership styles and choices about the distribution of management responsibilities, as demonstrated throughout this brief. When examining the leadership contexts of the three ECEP sites, a few broad comparisons warrant noting:

- ▶ **Size matters.** The challenge of leading change looks inherently different in a 32,000-student district like PSJA versus a district approximately three times that size, such as Denver, so leaders of different districts need different tools and strategies. In a large district, there are far too many competing demands and political exigencies for top-level leaders to be deeply involved in implementation of early college designs. Nonetheless, continued engagement from the superintendent goes a long way in terms of establishing clear priorities and removing obstacles, and it is important for the superintendent's office to stay up to date on such a significant initiative. Conversely, senior leaders in smaller districts may need to increase responsibility at the middle levels to promote sustainability when transitions at the top inevitably occur.
- ▶ **Prior experience matters.** As described above, PSJA has been focused on implementing and scaling early college high schools for almost 10 years, and this history has given the entire district time to deepen its understanding of the design components, build capacity, and foster community support. When principals of newer early college high schools in PSJA hit roadblocks, they can turn to leaders of other schools who have considerable experience dealing with similar challenges. At the outset of the grant, Brownsville and Denver had to dedicate time and energy to developing the teams of central office staff that would provide system-level support for curriculum, instruction, scheduling, counseling, and pathways development—structures that were already in place in PSJA.
- ▶ **Continuity matters.** Superintendent King's decade-long tenure in PSJA is extremely rare, and has undoubtedly been a protective factor that supported the district's success. According to a national survey of urban districts, the average superintendent tenure is just over three years.²⁸ In Brownsville and Denver, the number one leadership challenge has been turnover at all levels. While Superintendent Boasberg in Denver has been in his position for a lengthy term of eight years, there has been a complete turnover of DPS staff who work directly on early college

expansion over the course of the grant. Turnover is inevitable, but it can be particularly disruptive during the middle of a multiyear system change effort. Even in the best of cases, unexpected losses like the death of Loan Maas in Denver rattle the entire system. Leadership turnover can also prove a major setback at the school level and can impact the focus and morale of the campus. Principal transitions occurred in several i3 schools across all three districts, which required central office staff and external partners to train new leaders mid-course.

► **Decision-making structures matter.**

The examples in this brief also highlight the importance of taking into account each district's unique balance between top-down direction and school-level autonomy. Denver's decentralization empowers school leaders to assess the needs and goals of their own campus and incorporate the components of early college designs, along with other initiatives, that best fit within their individual school improvement strategy. Each school's implementation may look different, though the broader design principles remain the same. By contrast, the high level of centralization in PSJA allows the district to ensure a level of consistency and fidelity in implementation of early college designs at all schools, but it removes some strategic decision making from principals.

Regardless of these and other contextual differences, leaders in each of the three ECEP districts have accomplished systems-level changes. In all three districts, early college expansion reflected the superintendent's broader vision for college and career readiness. Vital champions also emerged at the middle levels of district administration, and these individuals took on the role of managing external relationships and translating early college goals into action items for their teams of district staff as well as for the participating schools. At the campus level, leadership teams steered their staff along a path of continuous learning and improvement.

There is no silver bullet with regard to leadership of such a complex systems change effort. Superintendent King in PSJA has achieved extraordinary success as a visionary leader, but how would the story have changed if he had left the district mid-course? Meanwhile, Assistant Superintendent Peña in Brownsville set her sights clearly on the goal of turning all the district's high schools into early colleges, and her efforts have paid off in tangible improvements in student outcomes. But she has had to expend energy garnering resources and achieving buy-in throughout the system, likely due, in part, to transition at the superintendent's level near the beginning of the grant. Loan Maas and other leaders in Denver built comprehensive pathways to guide students' course taking from ninth grade through postsecondary completion by working individually with each school and their college partners; however, the district may have benefited from an overarching governance structure that provided more connective tissue for all stakeholders.

“You need people who can think systemically but also are close enough to the real world of what’s happening inside schools.”

Looking to the future, leaders in each ECEP site will be put to the test as they attempt to sustain the momentum they have gained during the i3 grant.²⁹ Stakeholders reported that the grant outcomes—particularly the goal of having 90 percent of students earn college credit before high school graduation—served as powerful motivators for their work. The ambitious, measurable college course-taking goal provided a unifying focus for school and district administrators, and reviewing data on progress toward this goal was a central activity of the i3 Cabinet meetings. The grant was only temporary, however, and the work of districtwide early college transformation undeniably takes longer than five years. Leaders will face the challenge of continuing to measure the progress of early college expansion against aspirational goals that are widely accepted within their districts as well as across institutions and systems.

Nationwide, as other change managers take on the task of scaling early college from “small to large”—expanding across entire districts or regions—they may wish to consider the lessons that have emerged from the ECEP districts. The following principles are broadly applicable to a wide range of district contexts and organizational structures, and they offer salient reminders of the significance of leadership practices when building early college districts.

Recommendations for Leaders at Multiple Levels

► **Communicate a coherent vision and goals that are widely understood.**

At the top level, transformational leadership can set the course for a long-term journey. The superintendent’s office can establish early college expansion as a high priority, and continually reiterate its importance throughout the organization and to the broader community. Senior leaders also have a role to play in aligning the objectives of various district initiatives and grants and in demonstrating how early college can be integrated seamlessly and systemically into the district’s overall strategic plan.

► **Foster broad ownership and develop teams that share leadership responsibilities.**

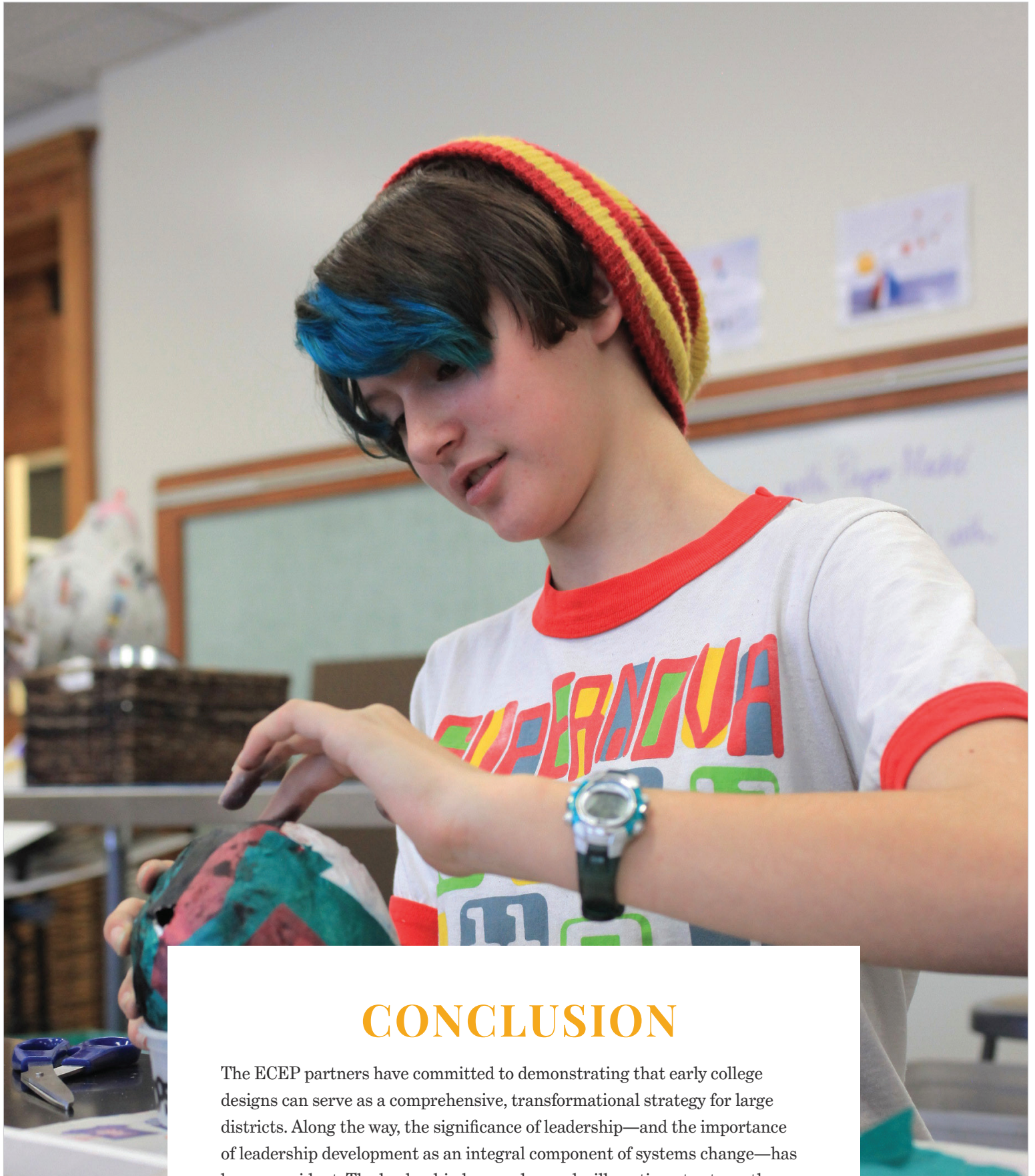
Distributed leadership—at the district and school levels—is essential to build capacity and multiply the number of early college champions before the clock runs out on a given grant or a key leader steps down. With a team approach, ownership of early college expansion is shared by a group of people who have all developed the knowledge and skills—and institutionalized the structures and practices—to sustain the initiative and maintain a consistent vision, even when strong leaders leave.

► **Develop governance structures to maximize the interconnected efforts of all partners.**

Systems leadership requires distributive governance structures to help streamline the activities of disconnected offices, departments, and institutions working toward a common goal. Regularly scheduled high-level meetings focused on early college expansion provide a valuable opportunity for keeping key benchmarks on the radar of all internal and external stakeholders. At the same time, the workgroups can be a vehicle for developing shared strategies and solutions.

► **Promote accountability for implementation by clearly identifying the changes that district administrators should expect to see.**

External grants provide a level of accountability for implementation, especially when they involve intermediary partners who visit schools regularly and observe classrooms, but this type of motivation is ephemeral. Districts can reinforce a more permanent sense of accountability at the school level by ensuring that the administrators who directly supervise principals develop their own early college expertise and can keep schools focused after external supports are gone. Similarly, by continuing to convene regular meetings of all early college stakeholders, senior-level district administrators can foster a sense of ongoing accountability for the changes that still need to be made in district policies and practices.



CONCLUSION

The ECEP partners have committed to demonstrating that early college designs can serve as a comprehensive, transformational strategy for large districts. Along the way, the significance of leadership—and the importance of leadership development as an integral component of systems change—has become evident. The leadership lessons learned will continue to strengthen efforts in PSJA, Brownsville, and Denver as the districts turn their focus to sustainability, while also informing the future work of JFF, Educate Texas, and other partners in the early college movement nationwide.

ENDNOTES

1. Jobs for the Future and its partners are helping school systems take on the task of converting multiple high schools into early colleges in districts across Colorado, Texas, Connecticut, Michigan, Ohio, Illinois, Massachusetts, and New York. See Webb and Gerwin, *Early College Expansion*.
2. Michael Webb and Carol Gerwin, *Early College Expansion: Propelling Students to Postsecondary Success, at a School Near You* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2014).
3. The districts and states highlighted in this brief alternately use the terms “dual enrollment,” “dual credit,” or “concurrent enrollment.” While there are nuances among these terms in some states, this brief will use the term “dual enrollment” to refer to courses taken by high school students for both secondary and postsecondary credit.
4. The Common Instructional Framework includes the following six strategies: Collaborative Group Work, Writing to Learn, Scaffolding, Questioning, Classroom Talk, and Literacy Groups. For more information about each strategy, see Jobs for the Future, *JFF’s Common Instructional Framework: Six Strategies to Build College Readiness* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2013).
5. These data come from the Early College High School Initiative Student Information System, or SIS, which includes data on over 100 early college high schools nationwide. From Webb and Gerwin, *Early College Expansion*.
6. Ibid.
7. Andrea Berger et al., *Early College, Early Success: Early College High School Initiative Impact Study* (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2013).
8. The external evaluation, which is being conducted by the SERVE Center at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, includes a quasi-experimental impact study in which ECEP schools are matched to similar schools not participating in ECEP. The final evaluation results will be available in 2018.
9. Data from 2015-16 Texas Academic Performance Report, accessed March 6, 2017, <https://rptsvr1.tea.texas.gov/perfreport/tapr/2016/srch.html?srch=D>.
10. Ibid.
11. 2015-16 data from Colorado Department of Education District Dashboard, accessed March 6, 2017, <http://www2.cde.state.co.us/schoolview/dish/dashboard.asp>.
12. Bernard M. Bass, “From Transactional to Transformational Leadership: Learning to Share the Vision,” *Organizational Dynamics* (1990): 19-31, accessed January 23, 2017, <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/009026169090061S>.
13. James P. Spillane, Richard Halverson and John B. Diamond, “Investigating School Leadership Practice: A Distributed Perspective,” *Educational Researcher* 30 (2001): 23-28, accessed January 23, 2017, [http://www.distributedleadership.org/assets/2001-spillane-halverson-diamond-investigating-school-leadership-practice-\(er\).pdf](http://www.distributedleadership.org/assets/2001-spillane-halverson-diamond-investigating-school-leadership-practice-(er).pdf); Chris Bierly, Betsy Doyle and Abigail Smith, *Transforming Schools: How Distributed Leadership Can Create More High-Performing Schools* (Boston: Bain & Company, 2016).
14. Deborah Ghate, Jane Lewis, and David Welbourn, *Systems Leadership: Exceptional Leadership for Exceptional Times* (Nottingham, UK: The Virtual Staff College, 2013).
15. Peter Senge, Hal Hamilton, and John Kania, “The Dawn of Systems Leadership,” *Stanford Social Innovation Review* (2015), accessed January 23, 2017, https://ssir.org/articles/entry/the_dawn_of_system_leadership; Equal Measure and Harder & Company, *Six Themes at the Heart of Systems Leadership* (Philadelphia: Equal Measure, 2016).

16. Michael Fullan, “Leadership from the Middle: A System Strategy,” *Education Canada* (2015): 22-26, accessed December 15, 2016, <http://michaelfullan.ca/leadership-from-the-middle-a-system-strategy/>.
17. Cecilia Le, *Launching Early College Districtwide: Pharr-San Juan-Alamo’s “College for All” Strategy* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2012).
18. Joel Vargas, *Sharing Responsibility for College Success: A Model Partnership Moves Students to Diplomas and Degrees* (Boston: Jobs for the Future, 2014).
19. Both the Texas Education Agency and Colorado Department of Education have official state designation processes for early college high schools, as defined in legislation and regulations. The designation process intends to uphold specific standards of integrity of the early college model. As of 2016-17, Texas had 164 designated Early College High Schools, and Colorado had 12.
20. South Texas College, *Dual Credit Programs: Instructional and Quality Standards Manual for College and School District Personnel* (McAllen, TX: South Texas College 2016).
21. Vargas, *Sharing Responsibility for College Success*.
22. Le, *Launching Early College Districtwide*.
23. Texas Southmost College’s current accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACs) precludes the institution from offering more than “50 percent of an educational program” at any location other than the main campus. Texas Southmost College has requested approval of a “substantive change” from SACs that would allow the college to offer a full associate’s degree through classes taught on high school campuses; at the time of this writing, however, these classes are capped at 29 credits per student.
24. Tom Boasberg, “Equity and Empowerment: The School as the Unit of Change,” memo, September 2016, accessed December 5, 2016, [http://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/AEH3ZQ095341/\\$file/DRAFT%20Theory%20of%20Action.pdf](http://www.boarddocs.com/co/dpsk12/Board.nsf/files/AEH3ZQ095341/$file/DRAFT%20Theory%20of%20Action.pdf).
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26. Barbara Neufeld and Dana Roper, *Coaching: A Strategy for Developing Instructional Capacity* (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute Program on Education and The Annenberg Institute for School Reform, 2003).
27. Richard Pascale, Mark Milleman, and Linda Gioja, *Surfing the Edge of Chaos: The Laws of Nature and the New Laws of Business* (New York: Three Rivers Press, 2001), cited in Michael Fullan, *Leading in a Culture of Change* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2007).
28. Council of the Great City Schools, “Urban School Superintendents: Characteristics, Tenure, and Salary, Eighth Survey and Report,” *Urban Indicator*, 2014, accessed February 13, 2017, http://www.cgcs.org/cms/lib/DC00001581/Centricity/Domain/87/Urban%20Indicator_Superintendent%20Summary%2011514.pdf.
29. A future brief from JFF will explore the issue of sustainability in the ECEP districts in more detail.



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