

INTRODUCTION TO THE HIDALGO  
INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

BUILDING STRONG COLLEGE  
PARTNERSHIPS

OPERATING AND FINANCING AN EARLY  
COLLEGE DISTRICT

RECRUITING, DEVELOPING, AND  
RETAINING TALENT

ALIGNING COURSES AND CAREER  
PATHWAYS FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS

CREATING A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE

DEVELOPING COMPREHENSIVE  
STUDENT SUPPORTS

ENGAGING FAMILY AND COMMUNITY

## CREATING A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE



### “COLLEGE” INCLUDES ALL POSTSECONDARY OPTIONS

- Two-year community colleges
- Two-year technical colleges
- Postsecondary training programs
- College-level certificate programs
- Four-year colleges and universities

“My family—nobody’s ever been to college. My sister tried to go. She told me she didn’t know what to do, she didn’t know how to study. I want to prove that my family can do it.”

—HIDALGO SENIOR WITH  
49 COLLEGE CREDITS



### PLUG IN TO LEARN MORE!

Learn more by exploring the USB drive, which contains related resources and example documents from Hidalgo.

Access the web version of this toolkit at [hidalgo.jff.org](http://hidalgo.jff.org).

Here in Hidalgo, our college-going culture is mostly easily witnessed through the banners that hang throughout our schools and the college shirts our students wear. But our students, teachers, and parents know that its core runs deeper: its foundation is built on the opportunities and supports we provide for each student to experience success in college coursework. Here are some of the approaches we’ve taken to create a college-going culture for all.

**MAKE SURE EVERYONE IS PART OF YOUR COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE.** One benefit of becoming an early college district is it helps develop a strong culture focused on college-going for every student. Changing school culture requires transforming people’s assumptions and expectations, and this can take time. Throughout this process, we emphasize the overall goal: college credits for everyone while in high school. Starting with this incoming class. This means all students, regardless of their past academic performance.

» **Engage all teachers and staff and give them strong roles.** To achieve college success for all students, we knew from the outset that we needed to engage all teachers and staff members to create a school culture that supports problem solving and improvement so that every student succeeds in college classes.

As a result, we give everyone—from school board trustees to parents to bus drivers—a role in determining how to reach that goal. For example, each assistant principal at the high school specializes in specific academic areas, and each meets often with those departments to help them solve problems that arise. We divide the day into eight periods, giving our teachers two periods each day outside of class when they can meet with one another or tutor students. We expanded the role of counselors to work with college liaisons, parents, and students and help our young people find college options that work for them.

Even those who are skeptical about early college for all often change their attitudes when given the opportunity to support students firsthand in achieving college goals. We offer teachers summer work in tutoring students and accompanying them at college. When teachers see how maturely their students act in college classes and how well they can perform, they become strong advocates of early college for all.

» **Be clear that all postsecondary education and training is “college.”** The fact that college is for everyone does not mean that all high school students have the same postsecondary goals. At the same time that we prepare every student to succeed in college-level English and math, we offer a wide range of postsecondary options, from general education to specialized, career-oriented training. At Hidalgo, every ninth grader selects a career

“As a freshman, I didn’t know how to study. I would just skim and read the notes, but now we go to study groups with friends and we get into detail with every little thing. I didn’t know how to do that freshman year.”

—HIDALGO SENIOR WITH 29 COLLEGE CREDITS



pathway of interest and later receives support in taking college courses in that pathway. For example, our pathway in business and marketing includes college courses in computer science and international marketing.

Regardless of which college pathway a student selects, we treat all postsecondary education as “college” in our conversations with students and parents. As a result, our students take pride in their postsecondary coursework, whether they are taking general education courses or career-oriented technical courses. And we raise the bar for everyone. For example, we expect every senior to apply to at least one college outside Texas.

» **Involve parents early and often.** Parents play a key role in encouraging college-going, but few Hidalgo parents have attended college themselves and many are unfamiliar with the college enrollment process. As a result, we developed a wide variety of activities to inform parents about college, from informal meetings with college professors to classes where parents can further their own education. These efforts have been crucial in making college a central part of family expectations in Hidalgo.

**START YOUNG AND BUILD AT EVERY GRADE LEVEL.** Every school in Hidalgo reinforces our message of “college for all.” Activities at all levels inform students and parents about college and career options, and we back up these messages and activities with curricula, teaching methods, and support services that prepare students to succeed in college classes.

» **Elementary schools.** From the first day of school, our students participate in activities that make college a reality in their lives. For example, there are college banners and displays throughout the hallways of all schools. We invite parents and community leaders into classrooms to talk about their college experiences. Each classroom adopts a college, and students write to the institutions, requesting pens, notebooks, and other items with the college logo. Our students meet with professors and wear college t-shirts to school on specially designated days. And teachers talk with parents about good study habits and other behaviors that build college success for their children.

» **Middle schools.** Our middle school in Hidalgo divides each of its three grade levels into two teams—and each team is associated with a college. The school organizes trips for the teams not just to colleges but to specific departments. This is part of the expectation that all students identify at least one area of academic interest and take pre-AP courses in that subject. In a course focusing on career pathways, all eighth graders learn how to identify both their own interests and the college options available to them at the high school. Near the end of the eighth grade, each student meets with a counselor to fill out an educational plan, including which college courses he or she might want to take.

» **High schools.** All incoming ninth graders participate in a summer academy in math and English. During summer academy, students prepare for and take the statewide college readiness assessment, the Texas Higher Education Assessment. All freshmen take pre-AP courses, and many of them take AP courses. Most students begin to take college classes during their junior year.

The high school is structured to function like a college campus. For example, students have evening access to a learning center/library. So that students can study after hours without keeping the entire school open, the entrance to the learning center is outside the high school. Tutoring and other student supports take place before, during, and after school. About two-thirds of our high school students participate in summer school programs that feature accelerated learning and college classes as well as credit recovery.