

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

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EARLY COLLEGE
DESIGN SERVICES

JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

IMPORTANT TO KNOW ABOUT COMMUNITIES

- Educational experiences and attainment
- Languages spoken at home
- Financial resources
- Computer access at home
- Neighborhood issues and concerns

Sometimes, reforms are brought into districts without community and family support. If teachers and principals are unfamiliar with the surrounding neighborhoods, and parents do not feel comfortable coming into schools to ask questions, then schools can become isolated islands. In these cases, students can feel caught between the ideals of college opportunity they hear at school and the reality of economic hardships they witness at home and in their neighborhoods.

EMBRACE YOUR FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES AS RESOURCES. We see our parents and our communities as crucial partners and allies in providing college opportunity to every student. In Hidalgo, we've used the following strategies to make sure our schools become an integral part of the community:

- » **Engage with community leaders.** We invite employers, community based agencies, and other civic leaders to participate in planning and other activities. In exchange, we also participate in their activities. Each year, we attend local events and volunteer for civic duties. An assistant superintendent at the district serves as mayor pro tem of the town.
- » **Learn about neighborhood histories and demographics.** As part of our teacher orientation, we take new teachers on a school bus tour of the neighborhoods, so they can see where their students live and where the parents work.
- » **Host community events about college and careers.** We launched our early college program by having a community celebration. As early as elementary school, we invite parents into classrooms to talk about their career paths. Every year, we organize a career fair at the high school.
- » **Walk your neighborhoods and talk to parents.** When a charter school opened near one of our elementary schools, our superintendent and an elementary school principal walked the neighborhood, knocked on doors, and talked with parents about their concerns for their children's education.

START FROM WHERE FAMILIES ARE. Family expectations about college and careers have a profound influence on student aspirations. As a result, we knew from the outset that getting parents on board was crucial to our efforts to support their children in passing college courses.

» **Plan parent engagement based on their needs.** In Hidalgo, most parents speak Spanish and have not had the benefit of a college education. As a result, all of our parent meetings are in Spanish as well as English, and in all of our meetings with parents we include information about college. For example, in the planning



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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.



year we developed a series of informal meetings between parents and professors. These sessions created an atmosphere of excitement and support—and began to dissolve the resistance of many parents regarding allowing their children to attend college as high school students.

In Hidalgo, we also encounter resistance from some parents in allowing their children, even after high school graduation, to attend college away from home. As a result, we regularly invite local alumni from UT-Austin, Texas A&M, and other universities to talk about the benefits of these kinds of institutions. Since many of the parents' concerns are financial, we also describe scholarships and help them fill out financial aid forms. We encourage every senior to apply to at least one out-of-state college.

» **Help parents understand what's required for college success.** Parents quickly understand two key benefits of early college: success in college can lead toward better job opportunities for their children, and college credits earned in high school can lower the cost of college for families. However, parents may not be familiar with the challenges of college course-taking while in high school, and they are certain to hear quickly from their children about how difficult their courses are. For example, we have a policy in high school to encourage students to take AP courses and discourage them from dropping those courses prematurely, before they have adjusted to the high expectations of these courses.

In early and ongoing meetings with parents: (1) we describe in detail the support systems the school has developed to help students succeed, including policies related to high expectations, and (2) we offer ways for parents to learn more about study habits and other kinds of “college knowledge” associated with success in college (see “Multiple Points of Access” below). We also recommend that if their children complain about academic challenges, the parents should listen, be understanding, and connect them to the support services at school.

PROVIDE MULTIPLE POINTS OF ACCESS AND ENGAGEMENT WITH PARENTS. In seeking to engage parents in school activities generally, and support for early college specifically, we have had success with these strategies:

» **Establish parent liaison positions.** To provide parents with easy access to a familiar contact, we created parent liaisons as staff positions at each school, which we fund through federal grants (Title I). When parents register for school, they are referred to the liaison, who speaks with them in Spanish, answers their questions, tries to sign them up for volunteering, and lets them know about upcoming parent meetings and ESL courses. Throughout the year, our liaisons help engage parents in school activities.

» **Many kinds of substantive parent meetings.** Parents are personally invited to a wide range of meetings about their own students' progress and needs. For example, at every key phase of the early college program, counselors lead groups of parents through informational meetings and encourage parents to ask questions. These include school-wide meetings, grade-level meetings, and sessions targeted to specific populations. In addition, there are district-wide meetings organized and led by parents. The programs include school-related topics (graduation requirements, colleges, scholarships), as well as skill building in areas identified by parents, such as drug awareness, border safety, the H1N1 virus, and parenting.

» **Parent academies.** We strongly encourage parents to pursue their own educational goals and we offer adult education in ESL, GED classes, computer instruction, and preparation for THEA (the statewide college readiness test). The classes are funded from several sources, including federal grants (Title I, Title III, and stimulus funding), philanthropic grants, and local funds. Parent education is a high priority for us because it completes the full circle—so that students have strong role models for educational success within their own families and neighborhoods.