

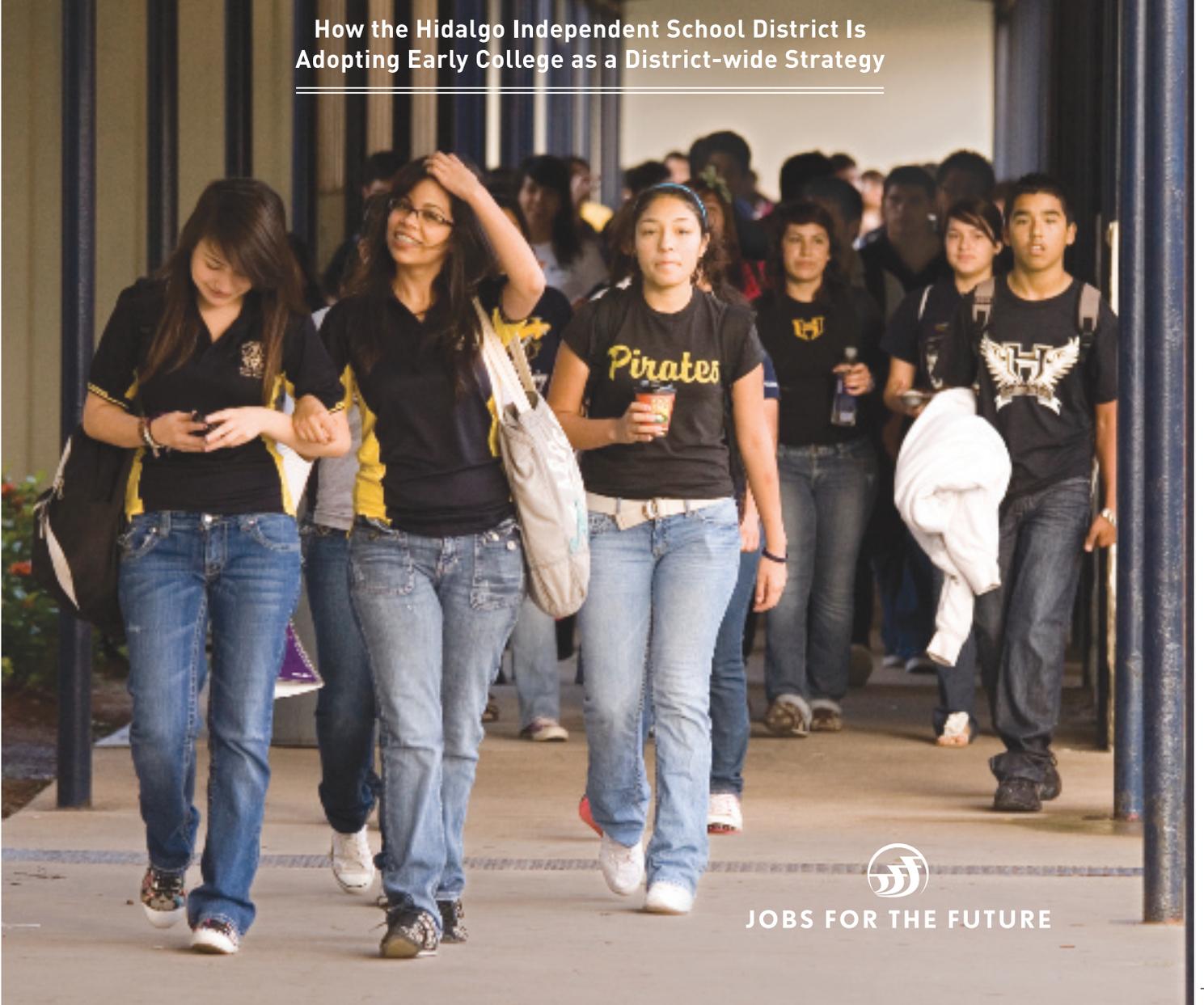


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# COLLEGE SUCCESS FOR ALL

How the Hidalgo Independent School District Is  
Adopting Early College as a District-wide Strategy

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JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

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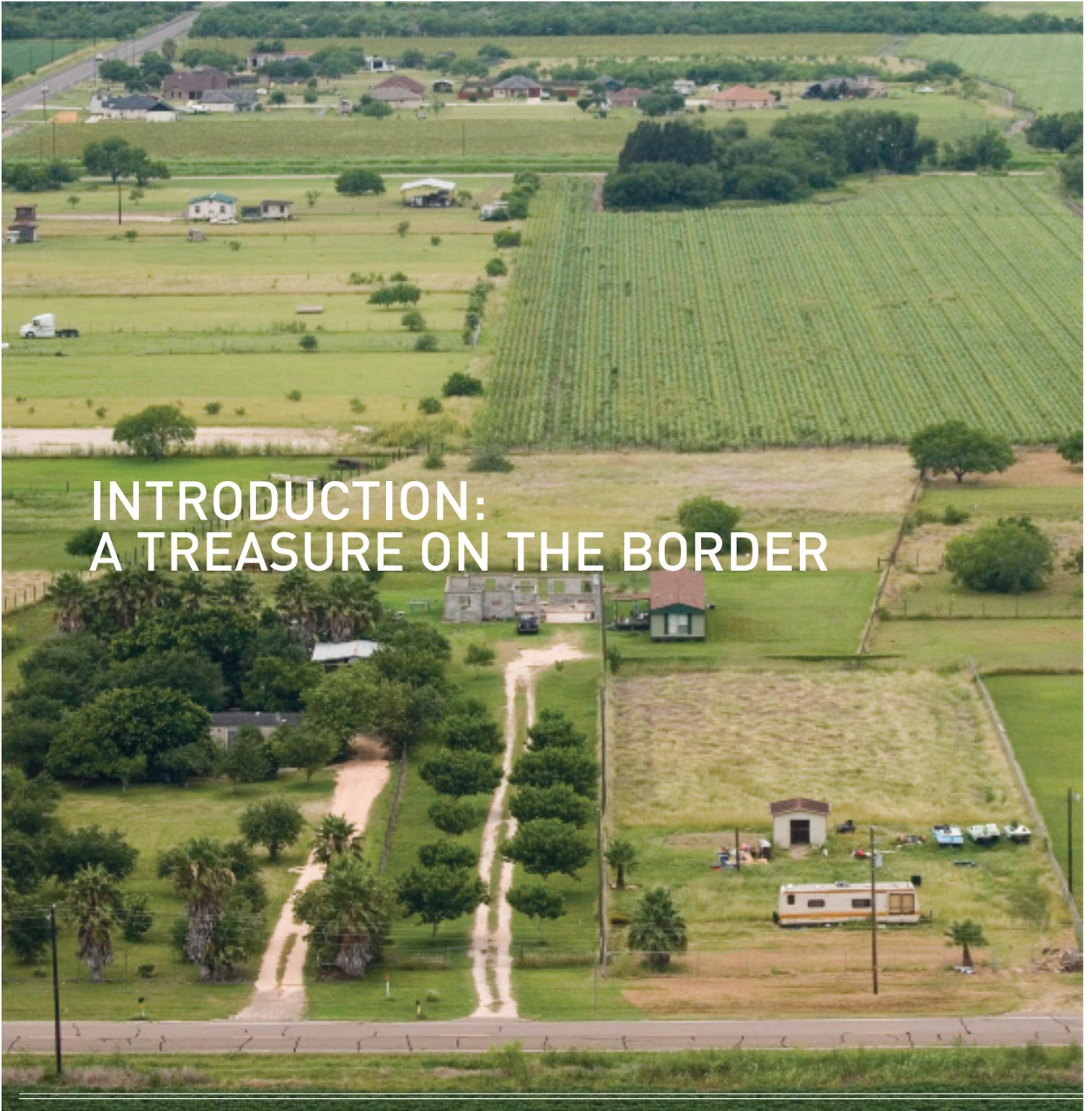
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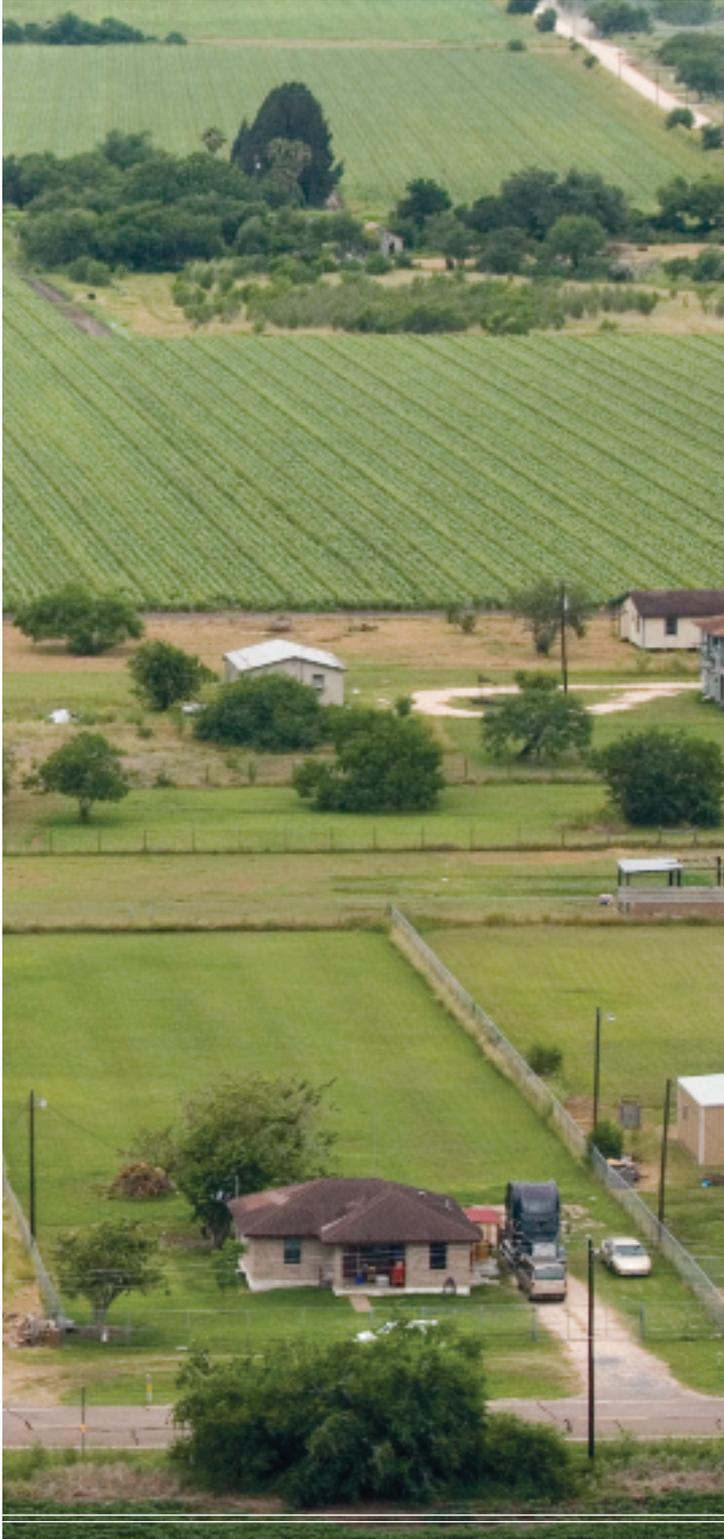
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Thad Nodine



# INTRODUCTION: A TREASURE ON THE BORDER



The Hidalgo Independent School District is expanding college readiness by preparing all students to earn college credits while they are still in high school.

When you fly over South Texas toward the Rio Grande Valley, the land stretches flat in a patchwork of rectangular shades of emerald. Here and there amid the fields you see the red or white rooftops of development, the zig-zags of trailer parks, and the flat rooftops of apartment buildings, warehouses, and shopping outlets. On ribbons of asphalt flanked by palms, trucks and cars seem to make slow headway. Between the fields, another cargo drifts even more leisurely, as water from the Rio Grande flows along a vast array of canals to bring productivity to the soil. All the sugarcane and citrus produced in the state comes from South Texas, which is also a large exporter of sorghum grain, cotton, and onions. As you look across the groves and fields toward the horizon, you might glimpse—beyond the stark border wall still being erected—the slow, gracious curves of the wide river itself, its water reflecting the vivid contours of sunset.

What you might miss in flying over so fast is a small city nestled in one of those broad curves of the Rio Grande. This border town, with its active international bridge, used to be the seat of government for Hidalgo County—and is still its namesake. Its quaint pumping-station museum and forested birding trails attract visitors, as does the largest “killer bee” statue in the world. At 10 feet and 2,000 pounds, the statue commemorates the first swarm of Africanized honey bees found in the United States, which brought Hidalgo a flurry of sensational headlines when they were discovered near the town. But it’s not the distinguished museum or the upstart bee that is garnering state and national attention now. It’s the Hidalgo Independent School District, serving 3,516 students, that is making heads turn.

In 2005, the district made an ambitious commitment. In partnership with nearby University of Texas-Pan American, the University of Texas System, the Communities Foundation of Texas/Texas High School Project, and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, the district promised that *all of its students*, not just a select group, would earn college credits before graduating from high school. This commitment by a small district in South Texas could be seen as part of a nationwide pattern: many districts are engaged in high school reform efforts to improve the college readiness of students. Many are also actively supporting dual enrollment in college classes for motivated students. But Hidalgo appears to be the first comprehensive public school district in the United States to prepare and expect *all students* to earn college credits while in high school. The demographics of Hidalgo’s student body—99.5 percent Hispanic, 90 percent economically disadvantaged, and 53 percent limited English proficient—make this commitment even more remarkable.

Since 2005, the district’s efforts have transformed its elementary and middle schools as well as its high school. The district has driven college expectations, more rigorous course sequencing, and student support systems into all of its schools, with the goal of preparing students and their families for college readiness by the time students reach high school.

At the high school, the district increased the rigor of its courses and aligned them with actual college courses that it began providing at the school and at partnering colleges. For students who may not be motivated to obtain a four-year degree, the district created career pathways, with articulated courses that can lead to professional certificates at local community and technical colleges. As students and their families struggled to meet the higher expectations, the high school expanded and added support systems, including a summer session that prepares students for the state’s college entrance exam and a parental program that engages family and community stakeholders around developing college-ready students. Meanwhile, the district advanced the education of its teachers through incentives for gaining Master’s degrees and adjunct status from postsecondary partners. The district also worked closely with the Communities Foundation of Texas/Texas High School Project to learn the ins and outs of pertinent state regulations and financing—in order to smooth college access and success for students.

Hidalgo’s efforts in these areas are outlined in the coming pages. But first comes the story of how this district took up the mantle of providing college credits for all its students and a look at preliminary outcomes for the first group of graduates. How Hidalgo charted its course—and how students and families responded—says a lot about the priorities of “this little treasure on the border,” as the district has become known.

## THE HIDALGO INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT

Rural district encompassing  
**36 square miles.**

Spanish is the home language for  
over **85% of residents.**

Southern boundary parallels the  
**Rio Grande River.**

Includes 4 elementary schools,  
1 middle school, 1 high school, and  
1 alternative high school

Total Enrollment: **3,519 students**

Student Demographics (2009-10):

- **99.5% Hispanic**, 0.2% African American, 0.2% White, 0.1% Asian/Pacific Islander
- **89% Economically Disadvantaged**
- **70% At Risk**
- **53% Limited English Proficient**

Source: Texas Education Agency, Public Education Information Management System, 2009-10.  
Note: The criteria for At Risk are defined in the Texas Education Code.





# 1 BECOMING AN EARLY COLLEGE DISTRICT

In 2005, the Hidalgo Independent School District adopted a district-wide early college approach. The early results are impressive.



## THE CONTEXT: LEADERSHIP, TEAMWORK, AND INNOVATION

In the late 1980s, the Hidalgo Independent School District ranked in the bottom 10 percent of Texas districts in student achievement. But during the next two decades, Hidalgo's leaders took a series of steps that improved student performance and gained support throughout the community. Chief among these transformations were efforts to focus everyone—from bus drivers to principals and from teachers to school board members—on doing what it takes to raise student achievement. This included shifting the board to be more open to innovation and change. It also featured efforts to get principals, assistant principals, and teachers working together in teams to improve instruction and curriculum.

When Dr. Daniel P. King became superintendent in 1999, one of his most visible early actions was to require students to wear uniforms. The decision was made in order to end discipline problems associated with gang colors, put all students on an equal footing, and develop a positive and inclusive school identity.

According to former Hidalgo students, there were changes in attitudes immediately. Former student Susana Phillips, who now has a Bachelor's degree from the University of Texas-Austin, said, "The gangs died down. It was a joke to mention their names." Veronica Trevino, a graduate of University of Texas-Austin, who is working on her Master's, said she immediately took to the uniforms because they brought "uniformity for all the kids. Everybody starts off at the same level. I did not grow up with the wealthiest family."

Dr. King also instituted a variety of programs to improve curriculum and instruction. During his tenure, a dual-language program was developed to build on the linguistic strength of Hidalgo's students; more Advanced Placement (AP) and other rigorous courses were offered, and more students were encouraged to take them; and dual enrollment offerings were expanded with local colleges. In addition, the district created stronger career pathways for students and a teacher internship program with local businesses.

As the district began earning annual awards for student performance from the state, the uniforms became a visible symbol of positive change. Back in the late eighties, Hidalgo's students were reticent to admit where they went to school. A decade later, Dr. King said, "you could go to the mall and high school kids were walking with their uniform shirts on. It was a vast difference in terms of pride of the school."

Board President Martin Cepeda credited leadership and teamwork—among staff, teachers, principals, and superintendents—for trying new approaches to improve student achievement. "You can't be afraid of change," he said. "It starts from the superintendent all the way to the custodians.... It's a team effort. Everybody counts. Everybody."

## EARLY COLLEGE FOR ALL

In 2005, Superintendent King was approached by the president of UT-Pan American, and later by the University of Texas System and the Communities Foundation of Texas/Texas High School Project, to consider creating an early college high school in the district. He and his team were attracted by the early college concept because they realized it could bring a unifying vision and structure to efforts underway at the district. "We were already committed to innovation and reform and to college for every student," he said.

The goal of early college high schools, which grew from an initiative inaugurated in 2002 by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, is to provide traditionally underserved students with an opportunity to earn a high school diploma and a substantial number of college credits, up to an Associate's degree, by the time they graduate from high school. In Texas, the Communities Foundation of Texas/Texas High School Project received funding through the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and Texas Education Agency to create and support early college high schools; today, there are 44 early college high schools and five Texas Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (T-STEM) early college high schools throughout the state.

Whereas dual enrollment programs have traditionally targeted high-achieving students, early college high schools focus on broad student populations underrepresented in postsecondary education, such as low-income youth, first-generation college-goers, English language learners, and students of color. Although the goals and student profile for the early college initiative fit Hidalgo's needs, there was one major obstacle. Early college schools include stand-alone high schools, schools within larger high schools, and schools located on college campuses. All of these models use a small-schools approach, with about 100 students per grade and about 400 students total in each school. The Hidalgo school district includes four elementary schools that feed into one middle school and Hidalgo High School, with about 800 students. The early college model meant that half the school would be left out. "My concept has always been to focus on *all* the kids," Dr. King said.

## 1 BECOMING AN EARLY COLLEGE DISTRICT

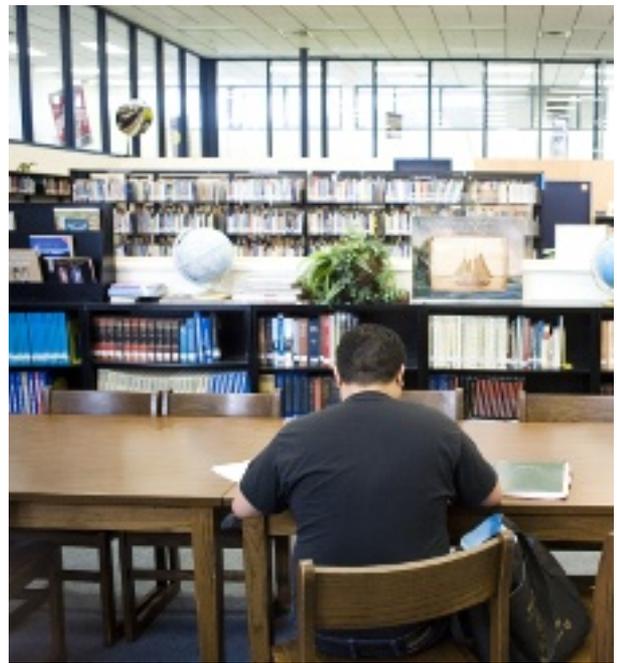
Although Dr. King was committed to district-wide change, he was concerned that if he held his ground, he might lose this opportunity to fund college-going aspirations for a large portion of Hidalgo's students. The funding guidelines clearly called for a small-schools approach; no one had proposed the creation of an early college high school *for all students in a comprehensive district*. According to Dr. King, "At the end of it all, I said, 'We're on board, but . . . I can't see taking half of the kids and leaving the other half out. So . . . why not do it for all the kids?'"

The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation eventually approved the proposal. "If we want to really transform schools, this is an opportunity to do that," Dr. King said. "Basically that got the green light."

When the district organized an event to announce its new approach, the community immediately embraced the concept. Everybody was there, from the mayor and city manager to business leaders and parents. Every school board member attended. The freshmen class that enrolled in fall 2006 was the first group of Hidalgo students to participate in the initiative. According to Dr. King:

*I'll never forget that class, and their parents, when we first told them about going to college while in high school. Their enthusiasm was tremendous... That sense that they are college-bound—I think it changed the culture of the community.*

As the district and its postsecondary partner, UT-Pan American, began implementing an early college approach, they borrowed from strategies adopted at other early college schools—for example, in working to align application and registration processes, scheduling, course requirements, textbooks, and assessments. But many challenges were unique to Hidalgo due to its emphasis on early college for *all students*. In facing these challenges, Hidalgo's history of teamwork and innovation became a real asset. For example, the district and UT-Pan American quickly realized that they needed to expand postsecondary options for those students who were not interested in pursuing four-year degrees. As a result, the district strengthened career and technical pathways: they reached out to South Texas College and Texas State Technical College and worked with them to provide students with articulated courses that lead to certificates at these institutions. The district also benefited from the ongoing guidance of Communities Foundation of Texas/Texas High School Project, which played an important role in building the partnerships and ensuring good communication between the stakeholders.



Current district Superintendent Edward Blaha, who was principal at Hidalgo High School when the early college program started, said that strengthening the career pathways was crucial to meeting the needs of Hidalgo's students. "You have to know your community and your kids," he said. "One size does not fit all.... What we originally thought we would do is not exactly what we did, because we learned along the path. We learned together."

## PRELIMINARY OUTCOMES

While the district has been flexible in adapting the early college approach to meet the needs of its students, the district's vision and commitment have remained steady: provide all students with a high school diploma and substantial college credits, thereby raising their college expectations and preparing them for postsecondary success. The results, though preliminary, are inspiring.

### Student Attitudes and Expectations

Teachers, parents, and students were overwhelmingly positive in describing the changes in student attitudes and expectations. Statistics teacher Lyn Onato said that before the high school adopted an early college approach,

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## WHAT IS AN EARLY COLLEGE DISTRICT?

*In seeking to bridge the divide between high school and college, the Hidalgo Independent School District offers:*

**College credits for all students.** Commits to preparing all students to take and pass rigorous college courses while in high school. These courses are offered for free, which is a key motivator for students and their families.

**College-going culture.** Engages with students, teachers, parents, and the community to create and sustain a college-going culture beginning in elementary grades.

**Academic alignment and rigor.** Works with postsecondary partners to develop an integrated and rigorous academic curriculum that builds from elementary school through college classes and that prepares all students for success in college.

**Career and technical pathways.** Partners with multiple postsecondary institutions to provide a wide range of college and career options to accommodate all students. These options include articulated career and technical courses leading to certificates at local community colleges, as well as general education courses transferable across colleges and universities.

**Comprehensive student supports.** Provides student-centered support systems that develop academic and social skills as well as the behaviors and conditions necessary for college completion.

**Policy Partnerships.** Partners with public and private entities to support state and other policies that assist students in earning college credits while in high school.

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“There were discipline problems. Many students were not focused. They were not serious about learning.” Daniel Cantu, a health sciences instructor who teaches pharmacology, said that early college changed the mindset of students, “because now they see that there’s more to high school and to education than just getting a high school degree.”

Leonor DeLeon, a mother with two teenage girls in the district, said that the district’s approach has taught her children that “school doesn’t finish with high school. It begins with the college.”

The first group of freshmen inducted into the early college program graduated on June 4, 2010. By their high school graduation, these students had achieved a remarkable 3,743 college credit hours. At the ceremony, Dr. Ana Maria Rodriguez, Interim Provost of

UT-Pan American, handed out certificates of college hours to more than 95 percent of the class—to the thunderous applause, proud grins, and many tears of parents, family, friends, teachers, administrators, the school board, and plenty of business and other community members.\* Individual college credit hours ranged from 1 to 75, and two-thirds of the students earned at least a semester of credit. Robert Ruiz, the salutatorian, brought down the house when he declared in his speech, “What better school to be recognized as a graduate in than Hidalgo Early College High School, a high school like no other in the country? Who would have guessed that a modest high school in a small town a few blocks away from the Mexican border would be home to a unique variety of opportunities that it offers to all its students?”

Robert, who graduated with 59 college credits, said that before graduation his proudest accomplishment was passing his first college class, which was chemistry. “If I could do that,” he said, “I knew I could pass any college class... Like I figured college out.” He said that “many people fear college. They think it’s going to be a completely different level and that you’re not going to be able to do it. We learned that we can do it.”

### Student Achievement

It’s too early to know how many of Hidalgo’s first early college graduates will now enroll in postsecondary education and how many will complete their educational goals. However, early indicators—including the number of college credits earned by the 2010 graduates—suggest that a district-wide early college strategy can succeed in providing students with substantial numbers of college credits and thereby help them achieve college success.

In examining other early outcomes, Hidalgo appears to be outperforming the state in several areas of academic rigor associated with college readiness, even though it has much higher percentages of students who are Hispanic, economically disadvantaged, identified as being at risk, and limited English proficient (see *Table 1*). On measures of college readiness, the students of Hidalgo also appear to be outperforming their peers in Region 1, which includes schools throughout the Rio Grande Valley.

**High graduation and completion rates.** The four-year graduation rate for Hidalgo’s class of 2008 was 82 percent, compared to 79 percent for the state as a whole and 75 percent for Region 1. Even more impressive is the Class of

\*Some special education students, because of severe disabilities, are not able to earn college credits. However, many special education students can and do earn college credits. Of the 52 high school students in special education in 2009-10, 24 earned college credits.

2008's near 100 percent completion rate, which indicates a dropout rate, by any number of reports that the state issues, of less than 2 percent.\* The Class of 2008 completion rate is 89.5 percent for the state and 88.6 percent for Region 1. (The class of 2008 is the most recent data available from the Texas Education Agency's Academic Excellence Indicator System.)

**A high percentage of students complete courses that prepare them for college.** Hidalgo has increased the percentages of students graduating under the state's Recommended High School Program and Distinguished Achievement Program—and even reached 100 percent in

These accomplishments have led to several awards for Hidalgo, including the H-E-B Excellence in Education award in 2007 for being the best small school district in Texas. The same year, *U.S. News and World Report* ranked Hidalgo's high school as #11 overall among America's best high schools. In 2009, the magazine ranked the high school #3 among America's top "economically disadvantaged" schools.

Hidalgo's administrators and teachers, however, emphasized that in graduating their first early college class, their work has only begun. For example, Mr. Blaha noted that the district has expanded the number of students taking

TABLE 1: STUDENT DEMOGRAPHICS, 2009-10

	ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED	HISPANIC	AT RISK	LIMITED ENGLISH PROFICIENT
HIDALGO ISD	89%	99%	70%	53%
REGION I (RIO GRANDE VALLEY)	86%	97%	65%	39%
STATE	59%	49%	49%	18%

Source: Texas Education Agency, Public Education Information Management System, 2009-10.  
Note: The criteria for At Risk are defined in the Texas Education Code.

2006-07 (see Figure 1). The RHSP and DAP are the graduation plans that are recommended for students pursuing postsecondary education.

**A high percentage of students complete advanced and dual enrollment courses.** Over the past several years, Hidalgo has increased the percentages of students that complete advanced and dual enrollment courses (see Figure 2). The achievements of Hidalgo students far exceed state averages in this area. Once data are included for 2008-09 and 2009-10 (when Hidalgo's first group of early college students graduates), Hidalgo's performance promises to be even higher.

SAT and ACT tests; for the class of 2008, 94 percent of Hidalgo's students took the SAT or the ACT, compared to 65 percent statewide. Now the district is working to improve the test scores, which still lag behind the state, partly because almost everyone is tested rather than just the highest-performing students. "The starting line is right behind our heels," he said. "That's as far as we've gone right now. There's miles to go, but we know we've stepped onto the right track, because this is good for kids."

\*Reported dropout rates for the Class of 2008 range from .3 percent to 1.6 percent depending on the specific data cut. Data was drawn from the following Texas Education Agency sources: Five-Year Extended Graduation, Completion, and Dropout Data by Campus, Class of 2008; Class of 2008 Campus Graduation Summary; and Secondary School Completion and Dropouts in Texas Public Schools 2008-09.

**FIGURE 1: PERCENTAGE OF GRADUATES COMPLETING A RECOMMENDED OR DISTINGUISHED PLAN**

	CLASS OF 2004	CLASS OF 2005	CLASS OF 2006	CLASS OF 2007	CLASS OF 2008
HIDALGO	93%	94%	96%	100%	98%
REGION 1	81%	83%	88%	89%	91%
STATE	68%	72%	76%	78%	81%

Source: Texas Education Agency, Public Education Information Management System, 2009-10.  
 Note: Includes the Recommended High School Program and Distinguished Achievement Program.



**FIGURE 2: ADVANCED COURSE/DUAL ENROLLMENT COMPLETION**

	CLASS OF 2004	CLASS OF 2005	CLASS OF 2006	CLASS OF 2007	CLASS OF 2008
HIDALGO	32%	30%	36%	37%	48%
REGION 1	21%	22%	24%	26%	28%
STATE	20%	21%	21%	22%	23%

Source: Texas Education Agency.  
 Note: While data about the class of 2010 is not yet available through the Texas Education Agency, district data shows that more than 95 percent of the graduating class successfully completed an advanced or dual enrollment course.



## 2 CREATING A COLLEGE-GOING CULTURE

Through its activities and programming, the Hidalgo Independent School District has embedded key elements of a rigorous college-going culture in its elementary, middle, and high schools. Students are rising to the challenge, and so are their parents.

When the Hidalgo Independent School District adopted an early college model in 2005, district leaders were enthusiastic about focusing on college readiness and success, including developing more rigorous and accelerated instruction and designing comprehensive supports for students. In addition, they believed that for these innovations to succeed, a community-wide shift needed to take place: students and their parents needed to fully embrace college-going as a given. The district and its college partners immediately took steps to instill a strong college-going culture among students, parents, teachers, and the broader community. Initially, these efforts focused on the high school level, but they now reach all the way to preschool.

## COLLEGE EXPECTATIONS FOR STUDENTS

### Elementary Schools

Many families with children in Hidalgo live in *colonias* at the edge of agricultural fields, where rows of substandard housing were erected long ago without regard to building codes. Many of these families cannot afford computers, or sometimes even paper and pencils. But they pride themselves on, and have passed bonds to support, the district's educational facilities. With this community backing, Hidalgo's four elementary schools are well-tended: clipped grass and clean sidewalks outside, and wide hallways with bright posters and banners along the walls inside.

It's not *just* the facilities that are notable when you visit Salinas Elementary School in Hidalgo. Inside, the displays focus on a central theme: college and career. Along one wall, colorful pictures of children in school uniforms are taped around big letters spelling out "College and Career Readiness: Our Future Begins Today." There's a poster about college awareness on a table, and one about career awareness, too, with pictures of children and families. On the way to the cafeteria, there's a long string of college and university banners, many from instate: University of North Texas, UT-Austin, Texas A&M. And many are from far away: Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Notre Dame, North Carolina, Michigan, Colorado.

The idea is to make college a visible presence in children's lives and imbed a college culture in everyday activities. Each of the 24 classrooms at the school adopts a university that the class researches. The students write to the institutions for information, as well as for free pens, pencils, erasers, notebooks, and other items with college logos. They also receive free college T-shirts, provided either by the institution or the school, and on selected days, the students get to wear their T-shirts instead of their school uniforms.

These signals about college appear to be having an effect. Arnulfo Ninal, a math teacher at the high school, has a 10-year-old who came home recently and declared, "I'm going to Michigan when I go to college. I want to be a Wolverine." Mr. Ninal smiled when he told that story. "That didn't happen before," he said. "There's a big shift as a district toward college, college, college."

The district provides preschool for free, as well as full-day kindergarten. In late fall, teachers give a survey in Spanish to parents about their habits with their children at home—concerning reading, communication, and other healthy behaviors. "By the time they reach the first grade," said Silverio Macias, principal of Salinas Elementary, "they have a real academic idea of what they should be doing with their child."

Salinas Elementary has ramped up and given a special name, "Building Scholars," to its tutoring program in literacy and writing that helps kids reach proficiency. During meetings with parents, teachers emphasize the importance of having a well-lit place—a desk, a corner, a lamp—that the family sets aside for homework, as well as other habits that build college success. College representatives come to the schools for assemblies, including a recent "blow-up planetarium" in a gym where the kids got to walk in, look at the stars, and ask questions of college professors.

The emphasis is not high school graduation; it's college and career. According to Mr. Macias, this has changed attitudes: "In Spanish we say, '*Cumplir*.' In English it means, 'Finish what you start.' The idea is that's what we need to do: instill into our children that they are in power. It's inside of *them*. It's like saying, 'You're a doctor. Realize yourself.'"

### Ida Diaz Junior High School

Ida Diaz Junior High is likewise focused on creating a shift so that postsecondary education—with all of its options, from training programs to the pursuit of advanced degrees—becomes the norm. This emphasis is tangible in the appearance of the school and in the structure of its programs.

College banners and information about careers are posted everywhere: in hallways, on doors, in the cafeteria, at the gym. Each grade level is clustered into two teams of teachers—a common middle school practice so that teachers across disciplines focus on a smaller group of students. At Ida Diaz, however, each of the six teams is associated with a university, such as Baylor or UT-San Antonio. Students wear their college shirts on Fridays and participate in college-themed pep rallies regularly.

The school organizes trips to colleges to help students get a sense of the academic culture of higher education. These trips are not generic tours; rather they focus on subject areas or departments and include contacts with professors. The school recently took 50 students to Texas A&M at Kingsville to visit the engineering department and watch a robotic competition. “Now they want to compete next year,” said Olivia Hernandez, the school principal. The school bused 60 students to a science and career fair at nearby South Texas College. “We were the only junior high school there,” Ms. Hernandez said. “The rest were college and high school kids.”

All junior high students are expected to identify at least one area of academic interest and prepare to take Pre-AP courses in that subject. The junior high has developed active TexPrep partnerships for students who show interest in STEM fields (science, technology, engineering, and math). The program includes over 60 students who are bused to South Texas College, Texas State Technical College, or UT-Pan American to participate in science labs and classes in computer science, logic, and physics. The classes on campus are once a month during the school year and five days per week in the summer, providing these young students with hands-on experience with college academics.

As another way to emphasize the connections between college and career, all eighth graders take a course focusing on career pathways. By the end of the year, they meet with counselors to begin filling out education plans for high school, including college courses they expect to take. Students are encouraged to select one of five career pathways offered by the high school. Counselors also meet with parents to explain the high school’s handbook of classes, which resembles the schedules that colleges provide, with course descriptions and pathways leading toward specialties.

These kinds of activities—along with changes in instruction, curriculum, and supports—are helping to raise student expectations about their own abilities. According to José Rangel, the high school principal, “By the time they get to us in high school, it’s already expected, so their mindset is already there: ‘I’m expected to do rigorous work. I’m expected to go above and beyond.’”

### **Hidalgo Early College High School**

The layout of Hidalgo Early College High School, with its offices and classrooms clustered at the campus center, a cafeteria located behind the instructional hallways, and

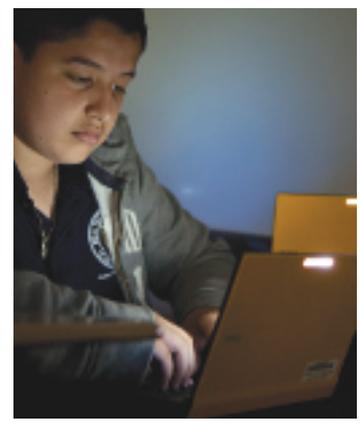
a new library/resource center at one end of campus and athletic facilities at the other, has a distinct campus feel. The cafeteria has the feel of an inviting college bistro. The resource center, when completed, will be open evenings and on Saturdays, allowing access to computers and other resources that students do not have at home.

As at the elementary and middle schools, college and career information is displayed throughout the campus. Near the main entry, a large poster shows a high school student, in a lab coat and protective glasses, examining a test tube in a college chemistry lab. A big bulletin board proclaims “Are You Ready for College?” and information is posted about testing dates, applications, and financial aid. College banners from across the country line the hallways.

Like many schools, Hidalgo has an annual College Night, in which representatives from colleges and universities set up tables and give information to students and families. But unlike most schools, in the weeks and months before College Night, students and parents attend meetings and receive packets of information about college requirements, applications, and financial aid. After College Night, they receive help, in school and after school, in researching colleges, completing applications, writing essays, filling out financial-aid forms, and applying for scholarships. The high school also organizes an annual Career Day, a popular local event where community members describe their careers and how they got started, including the role of education. Prior to the event, each high school student receives a unique schedule of presentations to attend, depending on his or her career interests.

These hands-on activities have been crucial in demystifying college and career and in raising expectations. Superintendent Blaha said, “You also get to sneak in the idea that it’s okay to go beyond Edinburg, Texas. That’s critical for us, because we have a lot of kids who would do extremely well in universities throughout the country. But there are some cultural blocks sometimes.”

The district’s focus on education *and* careers helps to provide *all* students with postsecondary options. “There is no difference between career tech as college and UT as college,” said Mr. Blaha. “They’re all going to college and they feel like they’re going to college. We don’t separate them.” He paused, then continued: “What do we do for the bottom 25 percent? That’s where as educators, it’s our responsibility to find a solution. They’re somebody’s child. If I’m number 188 of 188 students, I still go home to somebody. That student deserves the opportunity.”



## PARENT ENGAGEMENT

In developing a college-going culture, the district works directly with parents, few of whom have been to college. Through activities in English and Spanish, the district informs parents about educational practices in the United States, engages them in advocating for their children's college and career goals, and helps them identify and pursue their own educational goals.

This strategy—of information, motivation, and empowerment—has built trust among parents for the district's ambitious college-going plans for their children, and it has raised the level of education in the community. Most important, it appears to be encouraging more parents to speak out on their children's behalf. According to Arnulfo Ruiz, the college readiness facilitator at the junior high school, "Parents are calling *us* now. That is a crucial component about what is early college."

Most school districts offer parents the opportunity to volunteer in classrooms, but Hidalgo hires a parental liaison at each school to actively engage parents in classroom and school activities. The liaisons are parents themselves; they speak Spanish, are known in the community, and help parents feel more comfortable on school campuses.

As an innovative approach in reaching parents, the district put the liaisons in charge of uniforms. When parents register for school, they learn about the uniforms from the liaison, who also makes them feel at home and lets them know about volunteer opportunities, parent meetings, and ESL courses. According to Leonor DeLeon, a parent of two girls, "I learned English when I came here to help my daughters. The first day that I came to enroll my daughters in school, the facilitator said to me, 'We have computers, English classes; if you come here to help in the school, you can take classes too.'" Ms. DeLeon now speaks English fluently.

Each of the schools provides regular gatherings to inform and engage parents. For example, in 2009-10, the junior high school held school-wide parent meetings on new course sequencing, which enables more students to take algebra in the eighth grade, and new options for taking

pre-AP and AP courses in Spanish, so that students could receive college credits as seventh or eighth graders. The school held parent meetings by grade level to explain the school's college readiness strategies, including career pathways. The school also instituted special meetings where parents of students who are performing below grade level meet individually with teachers to examine achievement data and discuss strategies to improve performance.

The district also offers district-wide parent meetings every Wednesday. Parents run the meetings, with presentations by district staff and other invited speakers; about 40 parents attend each week. The programs include information about school-related topics, such as graduation requirements, colleges, and scholarships. Parents also learn skills and strategies involving drug awareness, safety issues, cancer awareness, the H1N1 virus, mental illnesses, and parenting.

Sandra Martinez, a parent of a tenth grader and two graduates of Hidalgo High School, said that her communication with her daughters had improved based on what she'd learned at these meetings. She said that the district teaches "students how to help to take more opportunities, but also we as parents have the opportunity to be better parents."

During all these activities, the district actively encourages parents to pursue their own educational goals. At Parent Academies, the district offers adult education in English as a second language, GED classes, computer instruction, and preparation for the Texas Higher Education Assessment, a statewide college readiness assessment.

The district emphasizes parent education because it strengthens the community and completes the full circle—so that students have strong role models in their own families. Two years ago, Ms. Martinez didn't speak much English, and neither she nor her husband had graduated from high school. Now, her husband has a GED and she is working on hers as well. "This is very important to demonstrate to my children," she said in flawless English. "If I can do it, they can do it."



3

## DEVELOPING STRONG COLLEGE PARTNERSHIPS

To develop integrated academic programs and student supports, the Hidalgo Independent School District has forged close partnerships with UT-Pan American, South Texas College, and Texas State Technical College.

Creating a college-going culture was an imperative for Hidalgo from the start—but it was not the only one. Another crucial transformation, both substantive and cultural, involved bridging the deep historical divide between high school and college. In the United States, K-12 schools and postsecondary institutions have their own course structures, funding streams, accountability, professional expectations, and governance. As a result, students typically face a big gap between high school and college—and neither high schools nor colleges take responsibility for the students who fall through that crack.

In taking responsibility for the success of *all* their students in their first college courses, Hidalgo worked with UT-Pan American—and later with South Texas College and Texas State Technical College as well—to create aligned coursework and comprehensive supports (see *Table 2*).

### PARTNERING WITH UT-PAN AMERICAN

Hidalgo has benefited from having support at UT-Pan American from the very top, where President Blandina Cárdenas, who retired in 2009, provided visible leadership. This guidance was important in leveraging the resources of the University of Texas system and providing clear signals that UT-Pan American was committed to improving college readiness. In addition, the UT System and the Communities Foundation of Texas/Texas High School Project served as intermediaries, providing support, advice, and networking.

Hidalgo also has benefited from consistent management at UT-Pan American, where Interim Provost Ana Maria Rodriguez has directed the early college program since its inception. During the planning year, 2005-06, she

frequently brought professors and others from the university to the district for parent nights, assemblies, and other events. A council of district and university representatives—including administrators, teachers, and faculty—met monthly to plan course alignment at the high school, improvements in instructional rigor, approval of course syllabi and testing, the development of student supports, reforms at the middle school, changes in professional development, logistical issues, and other components of early college.

Dr. Rodriguez understood from the beginning that the university, as well as the district, would have to make adjustments. “The organization of higher education is different from public schools,” she said. “So one of the first things we had to do was find ways to change both of them.” She met often with colleagues at UT-San Antonio, which had experience with early college schools.

The first college courses for Hidalgo’s early college students were offered in summer 2008, mostly to rising juniors: six sections of communications and computer science classes to 180 students. Dr. Rodriguez was very deliberate in selecting faculty members who had been effective with underprepared students, but even these professors found that they had to adjust their teaching styles, shortening their lectures and expanding their engagement strategies. Once they did that, she said, they “were amazed at how the kids could meet the expectations.”

According to Dr. Rodriguez, “Our faculty found out that we need to do some things different even for our students who are on our campus and not part of an early college high school. So it affected both institutions.”

**TABLE 2: HIDALGO’S POSTSECONDARY PARTNERS**

	UT-PAN AMERICAN	SOUTH TEXAS COLLEGE	TEXAS STATE TECHNICAL COLLEGE
LOCATION	Edinburg	McAllen	Harlingen
DRIVING DISTANCE FROM HIDALGO	About 40 minutes	About 20 minutes	About one hour
NUMBER OF STUDENTS	About 18,000	Over 22,000	Over 6,000
TYPE OF INSTITUTION	Four-year college	Community college	Technical college

**3 DEVELOPING  
STRONG COLLEGE PARTNERSHIPS**

Similarly, the school district found that it needed to usher in changes as well. The superintendent provided hands-on leadership for these efforts, supported by the assistant superintendent for curriculum. The principal and assistant principals at the high school already played a strong role in instructional leadership, so they were charged with directing the alignment of high school courses and student supports. Counselors took on a wide range of roles, from serving as college academic counselors to tracking student course-taking across educational systems.

From the beginning, the district charged the middle school principal with developing changes that could better prepare students for rigorous course-taking in high school. Transformations at the elementary schools developed in later years.

In addition, the district created a college readiness coordinator position at the high school and a college readiness facilitator at the junior high. By creating these positions, the district provided a point person at each school to work on behalf of students and parents as they met the challenges of college course-taking. Particularly in the early stages, these positions also helped facilitate teacher support for more rigorous instruction. Just as college professors learned to adapt their instruction, high school teachers have changed their practices. For example, the prompts that English teachers previously used in twelfth grade have been shifted down to eleventh grade, and many are now introduced to tenth graders. According to Sylvia Arcaute, who teaches English, “I focus on the literature that is focused on in college. You have to expose them.”

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**CHANGE STRATEGY: SMALL MEETINGS AND EARLY SUCCESSES**

During the early college planning phase for Hidalgo High School, the principal and assistant principal/college readiness coordinator, Marilu Navarro, adopted a “small meeting” strategy to address teachers’ concerns about the new approach. Usually, these were meetings with individual departments or smaller groups. “You sit and talk,” Ms. Navarro said. “You create that safe environment where [teachers] have a lot of say-so. But you try to guide them to accepting that there’s going to be some change....There is that small percentage who still says, ‘I don’t think this will work.’ But you try to make the message a very positive one. It’s a lot of conversation and a lot of give and take.”

When the high school offered the first college courses, it was quick to acknowledge students who earned credits in front of their peers and teachers. “You have a ceremony,” said Ms. Navarro, “and you make certificates and say, ‘Congratulations. These are your first three hours.’ And you do that in the teacher’s classroom where *they* can see it. And you discuss that and say, ‘This student just got three hours. Isn’t that great?’”

Ms. Navarro said that even the skeptical teachers, most of them, came on board when they saw how proud the students were, and how the attitudes of other students improved.

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**TABLE 3: CAREER-ORIENTED COLLEGE PROGRAMS FOR HIDALGO STUDENTS**

AT SOUTH TEXAS COLLEGE	AT TEXAS STATE TECHNICAL COLLEGE	AT HIDALGO HIGH SCHOOL
Precision Manufacturing and Drilling	Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA)	Pharmacy Technician
Automotive Technician	Aviation Mechanics	Oracle-Database Management
Heating Ventilation Air Conditioning	Computer-Assisted Design	
Electronic and Computer Maintenance		
Pre-Engineering		



## EXPANDING TO SOUTH TEXAS COLLEGE AND TEXAS STATE TECHNICAL COLLEGE

One of the first major challenges that the team from Hidalgo and UT-Pan Am faced in creating an early college district was developing a range of postsecondary options for students who initially were not interested in pursuing a four-year degree. “When we started this partnership,” said Dr. Rodriguez, “we did not include the community college in the partnership.... That was a mistake.”

Prior to the early college program, Hidalgo High School already had been working with the nearby community college, South Texas College, to provide a small number of dual enrollment courses to students. After the first year of early college, Hidalgo expanded this relationship. The district also expanded its partnership with Texas State Technical College in Harlingen. Hidalgo has a specific memorandum of understanding with UT-Pan Am for the

early college program. But at the community and technical colleges, the district is one among dozens of high schools participating in dual enrollment programs.

For Hidalgo students who have passed the state-required college readiness assessment, UT-Pan Am and South Texas College provide transfer-level college courses in general education subjects, from science and math to humanities and social science. South Texas College and Texas State Technical College also provide career-related courses, many of which do not require student clearance of the state readiness assessment. This enables a broader student population to earn college credits within the framework of a high school program. Even though some of these courses may not be transferable beyond the community college, the classes lead to certificates or degrees, such as in the health field or electronics (see Table 3). In addition, they introduce students to professional

terminology and networking—particularly important for those who are learning English as a second language—and provide them with college credits that help motivate them to continue their education.

### ENCOURAGING HIGH SCHOOL TEACHERS TO BECOME ADJUNCT FACULTY

As the high school's need for college offerings in core academic areas grew, the school district realized that using Hidalgo teachers as adjunct college faculty associated with UT-Pan Am or South Texas College was a more practical way of providing these courses at scale. With the nearest college campus a 20-minute drive from Hidalgo, the district recognized that providing college classes at the high school was key to making transportation costs manageable. As a result, the district has created incentives for teachers to become adjuncts. Through UT-Pan Am and South Texas College, Hidalgo teachers who have Master's degrees in their teaching field can apply to become affiliated faculty through those institutions. The school district encourages teachers to obtain this status by providing a \$3,000 increase in base pay to all who earn a Master's in their teaching field; in contrast, teachers who earn a Master's in education only receive a \$1,000 increase. The district also pays an additional \$500 for every college course that these instructors teach at the high school. Teachers who have adjunct status with South Texas College also receive \$350 per class directly from the college.

Eleven high school teachers have responded to these incentives and have become faculty members associated with UT-Pan Am or South Texas College. Their subject areas range from art and English to science and math. In addition, many teachers in the district are now enrolled in Master's programs. As more college classes in core academic subjects have been offered at the high school, on-campus course-taking at UT-Pan Am, South Texas College, and Texas State Technical College has become more focused on advanced academic or specialized elective offerings including technical courses that would be difficult to offer at the high school.

Having significant numbers of teachers affiliated with postsecondary institutions has been pivotal for Hidalgo students by raising the level of teacher preparation and education at the high school. In addition, it increases teachers' awareness and understanding of postsecondary expectations. To ensure quality, the appropriate department chairs of affiliated institutions oversee instructional practices and approve all syllabi, texts, and assessments. Faculty members observe instructional practices at the

high school. As with college classes, Hidalgo students fill out instructor evaluation forms, which the high school sends to the college for review. In many cases, department chairs encourage high school teachers to teach summer classes at the college.

The difference between high school and college, said Lyn Onato, a high school math instructor affiliated with South Texas College, is that high school students are surrounded by support systems that they're familiar with, and teachers understand their needs. "We follow the syllabus," she said. "But we give them more support. . . . College classes can start with explaining theory first. In high school classes, they need the practice right away."

In addition, having teachers who are affiliated with college faculty improves instruction. For example, Ms. Onato said that she receives frequent personal emails from the college math department. Recently, when she received an email about an upcoming survey of trees for a college biology class, she adapted it for her AP statistics course. "I collaborated with a biology teacher here on the high school campus," she said. "The biology class went and did the measurements [of the trees]; we're going to do the analysis in my statistics class. The springboard was the email from South Texas College."

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### FINANCING EARLY COLLEGE

One of the key motivators for low-income students and their families is the financial benefit of participating in early college. By earning college credits in high school, students can jump-start their college career for free.

For the Hidalgo school district, however, three key costs are associated with early college: transportation of students to college campuses; textbooks, which routinely cost between \$75 and \$150 per book, and often can only be used for one year; and tuition fees or teacher salaries. Currently, none of Hidalgo's postsecondary partners charges tuition for Hidalgo students who take courses on their campus, but that might change based on state regulations, grant funding, and their own financial conditions. South Texas College charges for its instructors who travel to Hidalgo Early College High School to teach.

By building a corps of adjunct teachers on its own staff, Hidalgo substantially reduces its transportation costs and takes greater control of its costs related to tuition and teachers.

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## 4 ALIGNING COURSES AND CAREER PATHWAYS FOR COLLEGE SUCCESS

Preparation for college course-taking begins early for students and includes an intensive summer session before ninth grade in core academic subjects. Students have several opportunities to pass college placement assessments well before graduation. They also have options to take a wide range of college classes along career pathways.

## INSTRUCTION IN CORE ACADEMIC SUBJECTS

### Course Alignment at Ida Diaz Junior High School

Becoming an early college district has helped Hidalgo create better aligned and more rigorous courses leading to and including college coursework in core academic areas. These efforts have now reached the middle grades, with plans for examining the fifth-to-sixth-grade transition. As part of an early college expansion grant provided by the Texas Educational Agency, four teams of Hidalgo’s middle and high school teachers—in language arts, math, science, and social studies—worked during the summers of 2008 and 2009 to “backwards map” curricular requirements beginning in the sixth grade, in order to lead to college course-taking by junior year of high school.

According to Irma Hinojosa, director of special populations for the district, in 2008 this focused on identifying “gaps in instruction, skills, and coursework that hinder college readiness.” In 2009, the teams began writing adjustments to the curriculum, a process they will continue in summer 2010.

In 2009-10, the junior high moved Algebra I from the ninth to the eighth grade, with about a third of the eighth graders enrolled in the course. Working with a district math coordinator, teachers accelerated the sixth- and seventh-grade math curriculum so that more students are prepared to take algebra. “My goal?” said Ms. Olivia Hernandez, the middle school principal. “Every junior high school student should leave with Algebra I.”

In middle and high schools, counselors encourage each student to identify a core subject area of interest and strength and to participate in pre-AP and AP courses in at least that subject. According to Superintendent Blaha, “Our AP courses are open enrollment. Our AP test scores are not great but I’m not worried about that. We want students to take more AP courses. If you don’t pass the AP test at the end, is it a failure? No, because we raised the level of expectation of what we want from you.”

The district, in fact, makes it more difficult for students to withdraw from AP courses than to get into them. “We’ll let you in,” Mr. Blaha said. “We’re not going to let you out easy.” This approach encourages students to remain in AP courses long enough to adapt to the academic rigor.

Junior high students are encouraged to take pre-AP Spanish in seventh grade and AP Spanish in eighth grade. In 2008-09, 48 eighth graders took AP Spanish, with 41 of them earning college credits: 22 earned a 5 on the exam, which is worth 12 college credits in the UT system; 14 earned a score of 4 (6 college credits), and 5 earned a 3 (3 college credits).

### Intensive Summer Academy for Rising Ninth Graders

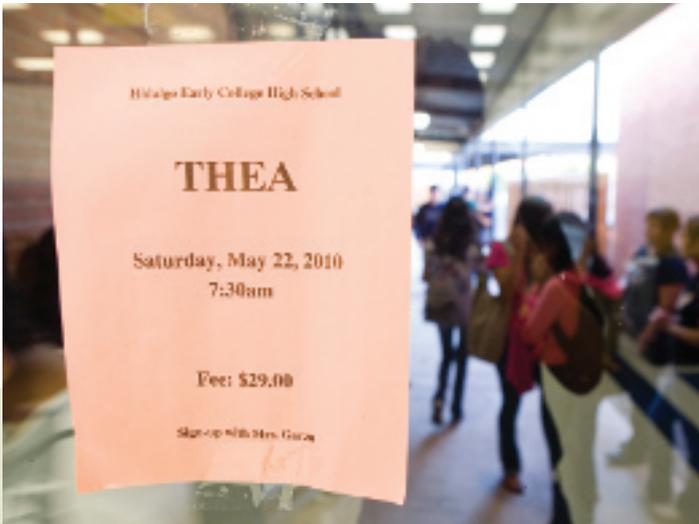
During the summer before high school, all rising ninth graders are expected to participate in an intensive four-week session focusing on math and language arts. A majority of the incoming class participates, and at the end of the session they take the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA), a state test in math, reading, and writing that indicates their level of readiness for college

**TABLE 4: HIDALGO COLLEGE COURSE-TAKING AND INTERVENTIONS BASED ON THEA**

	TIER I: THEA CLEARED	TIER II: THEA PARTIAL	TIER III: THEA PREP
COLLEGE COURSE-TAKING	Students who pass the THEA before 11th grade can earn 60+ hours of transfer-level college credit.	Students who pass portions of the THEA can take transfer-level college courses in the subject areas they pass.	Students who do not pass the THEA can take selected college courses, such as in career pathways.
COLLEGE READINESS	Students are college ready as defined by the THEA.	Students take accelerated coursework and supports in specific subject areas and have multiple chances to pass the THEA.	All students take a course that focuses on study skills and other habits associated with college success.

classes. Students who pass sections of the test can begin taking transfer-level college courses in the areas that they have passed. Even those who do not pass the test can take some dual enrollment classes that earn required elective college credits, such as art and music appreciation, and selected college classes in career pathways. Without taking the THEA, students cannot enroll in these courses.

The high school uses THEA results to plan accelerated, pre-AP and AP coursework and supports that lead all students toward earning college credits by graduation (see Table 4). Counselors help those who do not pass the THEA or sections of it as rising ninth graders determine when they are ready to retake it. The district offers the test about once a month and pays the costs for each student's first two tries. These strategies in using the THEA as part of high school help to clarify for students that college readiness and course-taking is the priority; high school graduation is a step toward that goal.



### Course Alignment at the Hidalgo Early College High School

Hidalgo High School introduces most students to their first college classes in the ninth grade, by enrolling them in either art or music appreciation. These are their first transferable college credits, and the courses are taught by Hidalgo teachers who have adjunct status. Also in the ninth grade, most students take a course on “University Success” at the high school, to teach them skills associated with college success. Meanwhile, ninth and tenth graders take rigorous classes to prepare them to enroll in college courses in core academic areas and along career pathways by the end of the tenth grade. This includes

encouragement to retake the THEA by the spring of sophomore year, so that students can enroll in college classes the following year. By the start of eleventh grade, a majority of Hidalgo’s high school students have passed at least a portion of the THEA.

As juniors and seniors, students who pass at least a portion of the THEA enroll in college courses in their strongest core academic areas, working primarily on general education credits that are transferable across public universities in Texas (see Table 5). Most of these courses are taught at the high school by teachers who have Master’s degrees and are affiliated with either UT-Pan Am or South Texas College. Students also take courses on college campuses; buses leave every afternoon for UT-Pan Am and Texas State Technical College and twice a day for South Texas College. Courses are also offered in the summer.

Students who are not THEA-cleared can take selected college courses along career pathways, as well as electives. The district encourages students to take dual enrollment courses that count toward certificates or degrees.

This course framework is the result of several years of adjustments to ensure that the curriculum at the high school builds toward college. For example, when science teachers found that students taking college science were not adequately prepared, they decided to offer additional pre-AP science courses. They also worked with the math department to provide more rigorous instruction in the ninth and tenth grades, including more coverage of quadratic equations and some trigonometric functions, which are necessary for pre-AP physics. These changes, advocated for by teachers, occurred because of the district’s commitment to the early college design.

As part of its comprehensive support system, the district is collaborating with South Texas College to develop a remedial course for students who have not passed the math portion of the THEA by the eleventh or twelfth grade, taught by Hidalgo teachers who have adjunct status. The goal is to have students who pass the course automatically place into college-level math at South Texas College and other institutions—saving the state the costs of remedial education in college and offering students a direct entry into classes that count toward their degree.

The potential for savings across the country if high schools were to offer this approach, in terms of time to degree and costs of education, is enormous. As Mr. Blaha said, “If we can offer them that success now, so that they go right into college algebra, we’ve already hurdled a major obstacle.”

**TABLE 5: COURSES LEADING TO AND INCLUDING COLLEGE CREDITS  
IN CORE ACADEMIC AREAS**

These are examples of courses offered and may be taken in later years, depending on readiness of students. Schedules include eight periods, so students take additional courses, including languages, electives, career pathways (see *Table 6*), and tutoring. Many students earn college credits in AP Spanish as well.

	9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
ENGLISH	Pre-AP English I	Pre-AP English II	<b>English Composition</b>	<b>English Literature</b>
MATH	Pre-AP Algebra I or Geometry	Pre-AP Geometry or Algebra II	<b>College Algebra or Precalculus</b>	<b>College Algebra, Calculus, AP Statistics, or AP Computer Science</b>
SCIENCE	Pre-AP Biology	Pre-AP Chemistry or Chemistry	Pre-AP Physics or Physics	<b>AP Biology, AP Chemistry, AP Physics, or AP Environmental Science</b>
SOCIAL STUDIES	Pre-AP World Geography	Pre-AP World History	<b>U.S. History</b>	<b>Government or Economics</b>
ELECTIVES	<b>Art or Music Appreciation, and College Success</b>	<b>Applied Music</b>	Electives or Major	Electives or Major
SUMMER SESSIONS		Rising 11th Graders: <b>Computer Info Systems and Communications</b>	Rising 12th Graders: <b>Philosophy, Sociology, or Psychology</b>	

College courses are shown in **bold** type.

Note: In some courses, students have the opportunity to earn college credits as well as take the AP exam.

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## WHO ENROLLS IN THE CNA PROGRAM?

In June 2010, Noel graduated from Hidalgo with seven college credits and a certificate from the Certified Nurse's Assistant program at Texas State Technical College. At his graduation, his grandparents were in the audience cheering, standing in for his mother and father, who passed away when Noel was five years old. Since then, he and his brother have been raised by their grandparents, who do not speak English.

Every day during spring 2010, Noel took classes at the high school in the morning, got on a yellow school bus at noon, and ate lunch and studied during the hour-long commute to the college, where he learned in a clinical setting how to be a nurse's assistant. The high school helped him purchase the light blue scrubs he wore every day, but he had to buy his own stethoscope.

Why did Noel become a CNA? "It helps you get one step further into college," he said. "It helps you get one step into the medical field." He said that he's interested in the health profession because "I want to help people not have to go through what I felt like that day" when his parents died. "What better way than in the health field?"

Noel also has a unique focus within the profession. He said he wants to be a physical therapist and a psychologist because he is "interested in emotional issues and how they are related to physical issues." He's already been accepted at UT-Brownsville, where he plans to enroll in fall 2010.

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## ARTICULATION OF COURSES ALONG CAREER PATHWAYS

To provide all students with a range of postsecondary options, the Hidalgo school district has strengthened its career pathways and worked with South Texas College and Texas State Technical College to articulate courses at the high school that earn college credits toward certificates or Associate’s degrees at those institutions. These options have proven to be instrumental for those students who prefer hands-on learning activities that are common in career and technical education (CTE), as well as students who need to support themselves in college. In addition, career pathways open the door to college for many students who may not be convinced that a four-year degree is for them.

Preparation for careers begins in elementary school, where students begin to learn about careers that are popular in the Rio Grande Valley. At the junior high school, all eighth graders take a semester-long career awareness course, with several weeks dedicated to each of five career pathways offered at the high school: business and marketing; industrial and engineering technology; health science and technology; human development management and services; and personal and protective services. The junior high has recently purchased a Pitsco educational curriculum, which immerses students in hands-on, interactive modes of learning core academic concepts. For example, the system helps students learn algebra while building a robot.

In early spring, high school counselors meet with eighth graders to review the career pathways. During the registration process about a month later, the counselors help students fill out their educational plans for high school and select career pathways.

All high school students, regardless of career pathway, enroll in rigorous academic courses to prepare them for college. In addition, the high school’s eight-period schedule provides students with the flexibility to also make progress in their identified career areas (see *Table 6 for the business and marketing pathway*). The high school has worked closely with its college partners to articulate career-related courses with those institutions. Through articulation, selected courses offered at the high school can count as college credit at South Texas College or Texas State Technical College, among other institutions, if the graduate enrolls at one of those institutions. For students, this shortens the pathway to obtaining a certificate.

### WHY OFFER A CNA PROGRAM?

“I tell parents, ‘We’ve got over a million bilingual people [in the Rio Grande Valley], yet if you visit our hospitals we don’t have bilingual nurses. We’re importing them from outside the country.’ I ask parents, ‘Why is that? Are we telling our kids that you are not capable of this?’”

“And so the CNA program, this is the bottom rung of the ladder. You’ve got to tell kids, ‘Put your foot on the bottom rung to get up.’ There’s very few of us who can jump to the third rung right away. The intent of the CNA is to have students accept the idea that the medical field is possible. If students get a CNA license, they can work in a doctor’s office. We put them in an environment . . . of professional language, relationships between patients, and coworkers and doctors. I don’t know any doctor or RN who graduated from high school and was a doctor in 18 weeks. You have to start your path.” –Superintendent Edward Blaha

**TABLE 6: SAMPLE COURSE SEQUENCE FOR BUSINESS AND MARKETING PATHWAY**

Courses where students can earn college credit are in **bold** type.

9TH GRADE	10TH GRADE	11TH GRADE	12TH GRADE
Teen leadership	Business Management & Business Ownership or Intro to Business & Record-keeping	<b>Intro to Computer Science &amp; Business Part I</b> or <b>Business Computer Information Systems: International Business</b>	<b>Advanced Computer Science &amp; Business Part II</b> or <b>AP Computer Science</b> or <b>Business Computer Information Systems II: International Marketing</b>

Note: These courses represent one of eight periods in each student’s schedule; students can earn other college credits as well (see *table 5*) and take additional courses along their career pathway.



## 5 DEVELOPING COMPREHENSIVE STUDENT SUPPORTS

The Hidalgo school district has developed a wide range of support programs that assist students in preparing for and completing college courses.

## INDIVIDUALIZED COUNSELING AND EDUCATIONAL PLANNING

The Hidalgo school district emphasizes a personal, hands-on approach with students and families. At all its schools, the principals, assistant principals, counselors, teachers—and even the bus drivers and other staff—make an effort to get to know students and their parents and be responsive to their needs. Conversely, students and parents who have questions or who need help can call upon a wide range of people, including parent liaisons at each school.

At the junior high and high schools, students and their families have come to rely increasingly on counselors for a wide range of support and guidance, and the counselors' role has expanded substantially since the inception of early college. According to Cristito Lampos, a high school counselor for six years and a math teacher for twelve, "Our job probably tripled."

Besides taking on traditional activities in academic counseling, social/emotional counseling, parent engagement, and crisis management, the counselors have expanded their roles in career and educational planning and other areas. Beginning in middle school, counselors meet with students and parents to explain and simplify the high school's complex college and career options. In high school, they closely monitor students' credits to ensure that all students stay on track to graduation. They let students know when to retake the THEA so they can enroll in more college courses, and they work with students to adjust their educational and career plans along the way.

Counselors also manage master scheduling across three postsecondary institutions, including staying up to date with the details of college and university requirements and prerequisites. They lead meetings to help students and parents fill out college forms and explain the state assessments and graduation requirements for high school. They run Career Day and College Night, for which they create unique schedules and information for each student and family.

As soon as high school graduation is over, the counselors manage the THEA summer academy. At the beginning of the school year, they run ninth-grade orientation as a half-day meeting to provide families with information about credits, graduation, and college-going—followed by a barbeque.

Throughout these activities, the counselors' approach is team-oriented and focused on solving students' needs. Each counselor specializes in specific career pathways,

but according to Claudia Martinez, a high school counselor for six years, "Our philosophy is any student can walk through our door; they don't have to wait to talk to a certain counselor."

Counselors are supported by a team of active assistant principals and engaged teachers, including a college readiness coordinator. She works like an ombudsman on behalf of students, providing them with guidance and serving a connector role across counseling, teaching, and administrative functions as well as across K-12 and post-secondary institutional structures.

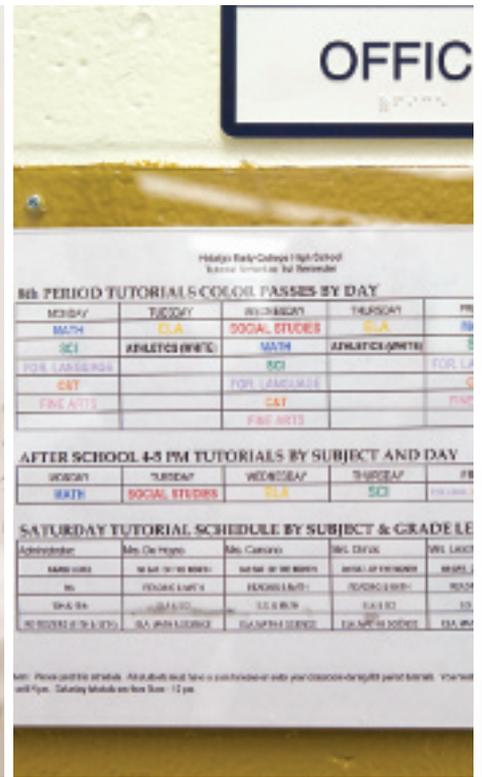
Marilu Navarro, an assistant principal/college readiness coordinator at the high school, said that a hands-on approach has been vital for the students, who often just need some direction and confidence when they are challenged by higher expectations. For example, she said that students rushed into her office one day after attending the first day of a college psychology course. The professor had given them a syllabus with reading assignments and let them know that he would be calling on several students each day in class, asking questions based on the readings. If a student didn't know the answer, that student could expect an F for the day. The students were in a panic; they didn't know what to do. According to Ms. Navarro:

*I said, "Well, let's start a study group." So they learned to outline the chapter. They learned to discuss the chapter. They asked, "Do we have to do this every day?" I said, "Well, it looks like you have to do this every day." So they created their study group and they've gone through the whole process.*

Ms. Navarro said that once students learned to help one another, they passed the course. "It's about teaching them the college culture, the college mentality," she said. "They may be enrolled in a college course, but they're still 14. It may take four years to get them there, but we're hoping that when they do leave us, they leave us with that mentality of 'I'm independent. I can ask questions. I can go explore.'"

## COMPREHENSIVE ACADEMIC TUTORING AND ACCELERATED LEARNING

Besides having a wide range of counseling options, Hidalgo's students also have access to a wide range of academic interventions outside of class. Both at the middle school and high school, student and teacher schedules allow for flexibility for tutoring and other accelerated learning opportunities.



In 2009-10, the middle school changed its school day to create an advisory period. This is a common time during which all students receive tutoring and participate in academic enrichment activities. Students needing assistance in math or language arts are tutored, in groups of about 10 to 15 students, by their core teachers. Other students are grouped in larger classes and participate in enrichment activities, such as reading novels, writing, or creating presentations.

At the high school, the eight-period day builds in flexibility for academic tutoring during school. All teachers are scheduled for two planning periods: a personal planning period and a common one for teachers in the same department. Early in each semester, teachers use the

common period to meet daily with their department to discuss their curriculum, align their lessons, and identify students who may need extra help. After the first several weeks, the common periods are used to pull students out and provide tutoring, including additional preparation for the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS, the state assessment for K-12 schools) and the THEA.

Teachers also provide tutoring after school every day and on Saturdays. Students who need additional support are directed to stay after hours, and busing is provided late so students can get home. Teachers receive extra compensation for Saturdays but not for afternoon weekdays. Mrs. Onato, who teaches math, said that she typically stays until 5:00 p.m. every weekday. Bishakha Mukherji, who

## SPECIAL EDUCATION

Hidalgo encourages special education students, based on each student's abilities and their Individualized Educational Plan, to take challenging courses and enroll in college classes. Of the 52 high school students in special education in 2009-10, 24 earned college credits.

The district provides one-on-one assistance to special education students in their pre-AP and AP classes, as well as one-on-one tutorials in core subjects after school and on Saturdays. Each year, the district takes special education students to South Texas College, Texas State Technical College, and UT-Pan Am, where they tour the campus and visit the office of disabilities. Later, when they enroll at the college, they know exactly where the office is and what services are provided.

Rebecca Rodriguez, director of special education, said that the district's emphasis on college for all has changed the mindset of many of her students, and career pathways have provided new options, particularly in manufacturing, construction, computer maintenance, and health care. "Our students," she said, "they come from very poor backgrounds, and our families are very humble. So when they're able to get one college hour, that's something that no one in their family has ever been able to do. And I don't care if it's one, but at least they've got one college credit, or they've got three college credits. They've already started that trend for the rest of their brothers and sisters. That's a proud moment."



teaches English, said, “Many [students] don’t have computers at home, so we stay as long as they need.”

Students likewise said they depended on tutoring. “I’m not good at math,” said Leonor, a senior at the high school in 2009-10, “but I stay here until 5:00 sometimes for tutoring. Or I come on Saturdays.”

The resource center the district is building will have its own entrance, so it can stay open after the school is closed, making it easier to accommodate after-school academic needs.

Hidalgo also uses the gaps between high school and college schedules to provide students with extra academic help. Since college classes are often offered on alternate days, high school teachers work with students on the off days, providing academic support and assisting with homework. In addition, classes at some colleges end two weeks before the school semester does; in these cases, teachers are scheduled for independent study with students for tutoring and support. Finally, when high school teachers offer college classes as adjuncts, the courses are usually year-long instead of one semester, which provides students with more time to assimilate the material.

One of the programs the district has created for students who need more intensive support is the “Success Academy.” Housed in a separate building on the high school campus, the Success Academy enrolls tenth graders who have had persistent difficulties in passing the TAKS in English language arts and immerses students in a literacy-rich year. This home-grown program has been enormously successful; during the program’s first year,

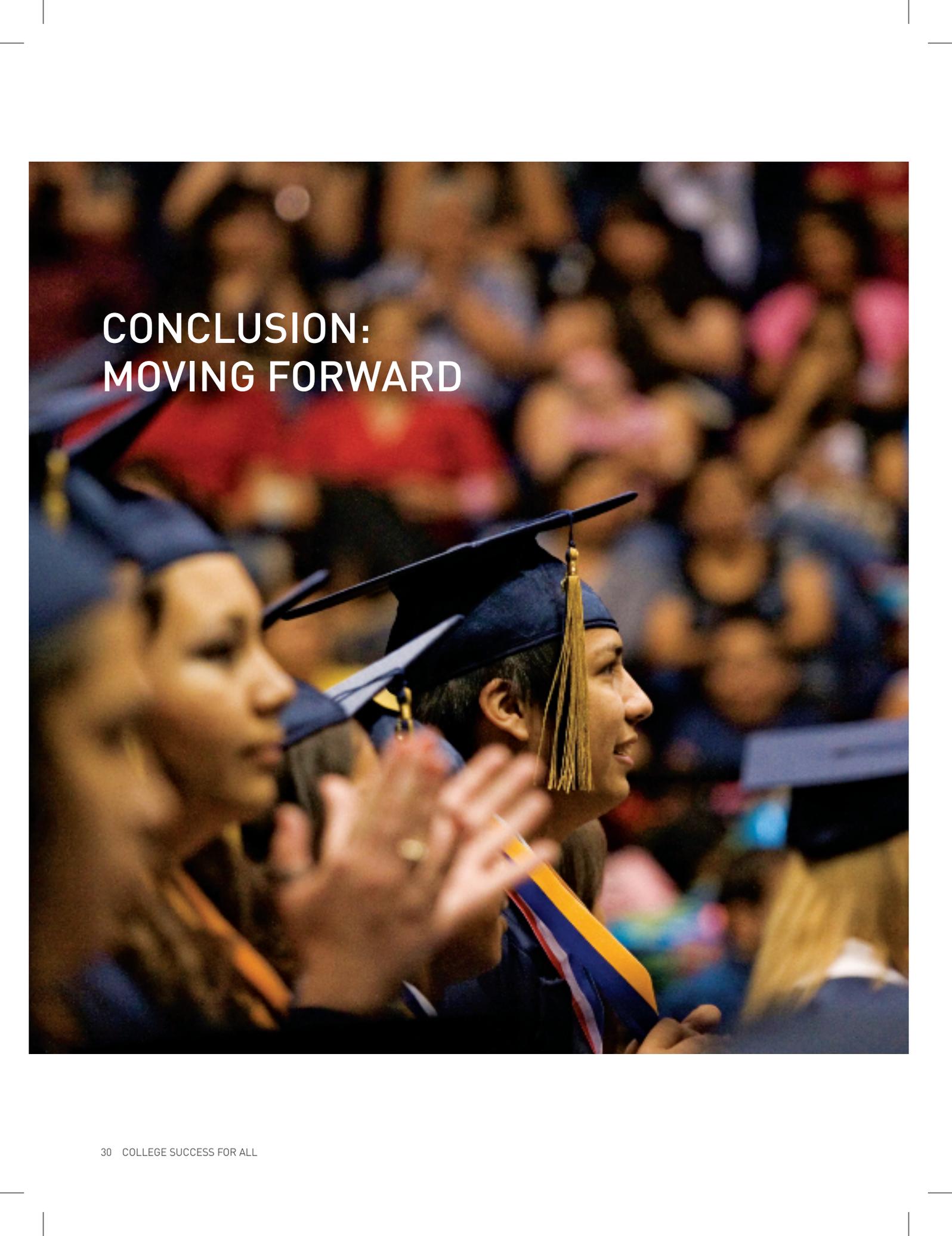
53 percent of students who had never previously passed the TAKS earned a passing score for the first time.

The district also runs Hidalgo Academy, a special program with a capacity of thirty for students who are at risk of not graduating. In a small, student-centered environment, these students receive personalized instruction and intensive wraparound supports. However, even in this program, with students struggling to just get out of high school, the district emphasizes that the goal is a postsecondary degree. Dr. Carmen Pacheco, principal of the Hidalgo Academy, said, “The kids know the expectation. They know I want them to bring me their college diplomas.”

This message is being heard: Of the 23 Hidalgo Academy students who graduated in 2009, 17 are now in college.

For English language learners who are new to the country, the school district offers an intensive program in which students receive two class periods of English language and a math course with language support. After the students learn English, they can enroll in college classes, although they may need additional support.

Leonor is an example of a student who enrolled in Hidalgo Early College High School right after her family arrived from Mexico. During her senior year, she volunteered to provide translation for English language learners—because she remembered how hard it was for her to understand English. “During my first month here,” she said, “I couldn’t understand anybody. It was like Chinese. But after awhile, talking and listening to people, you learn the language.” Leonor graduated in June 2010 with 35 college credits.

A photograph of graduates in blue caps and gowns, some clapping, during a ceremony. The background is a blurred crowd of people.

# CONCLUSION: MOVING FORWARD



## As the Hidalgo district faces new challenges, it looks to build on its success.

The Hidalgo Independent School District is at a crossroads: its first group of early college students graduated in June 2010; the original grant funding for its early college programs is coming to an end; its postsecondary partnerships with its nearby university, community college, and technical college are changing as those institutions wrestle with their own budget challenges; and the district is taking steps to sustain the initiative—including applying for grants, streamlining procedures, finding cost savings, and doing everything it can to build on its early college approach.

According to Mr. Blaha, it's not a question of turning back but of determining the best ways to move forward—because students, parents, and the community have already accepted success in college as the goal of high school. “We know we can do this,” he said. “We’ve convinced ourselves that this is possible. It’s no longer someone saying, ‘It should happen.’ We’re saying, ‘Here it is.’”

Hidalgo’s early successes have already brought national and statewide recognition, but the district’s next steps are even more exciting. As a comprehensive public school district serving at-risk, low-income English language learners, Hidalgo’s progress in preparing all students for college has nationwide implications. If early outcomes hold, Hidalgo’s high school graduates will be more likely: to enroll in college after high school; to bypass

low-level remedial courses; to complete college certificates or degrees; and to more quickly earn a postsecondary credential.

The potential financial savings to taxpayers and to students and their families are enormous. The next five years will be pivotal, as Hidalgo continues to develop its programs and its graduates advance toward and obtain college certificates and degrees.

Carlos Cardoza, treasurer of the school board and a trustee for 13 years, has several children, all of whom, he said, have the ability to succeed in college. But his oldest daughter graduated from high school well before the early college program took effect. In college, she has had to take remedial classes, which has slowed her progress toward her degree. “That’s where they fall behind,” he said. “And that makes it a lot different, in the pocketbook . . . because you have to pay for that.”

The district has a new college-going vision, courses, and supports in place for Mr. Cardoza’s youngest daughter and her classmates. She just finished seventh grade, but she already has taken pre-AP classes in preparation for the AP and college classes she’ll take in high school. “These kids now that graduate, they’re ready,” her father said. “We may not be a big school, but our kids are doing alright. That’s why we call this a little treasure on the border.”

### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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