

HIDALGO EARLY COLLEGE DISTRICT

Teacher Recruitment and Retention in Hidalgo

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The recruitment and retention of highly effective teachers who are aligned with Hidalgo’s mission is a central part of the district’s early college approach.

Teacher shortages have forced many school districts in rural and low-income neighborhoods to scramble, year after year, to attract highly effective teachers. That’s not the case at the Hidalgo Independent School District, which has developed long-term strategies for teacher recruitment and retention. These strategies have provided the district with leverage in attracting and retaining effective teachers who are committed to the district’s vision of college success for all.

In recruiting teachers to Hidalgo, the district draws on two key attributes: its supportive, team-oriented teaching culture driven toward student success, and its strong vision to help all students earn college credits while in high school. This reputation as a rewarding place to work and a visionary district helps to draw talented teachers to this small town on the border of the Rio Grande River.

In promoting retention, the district has created teacher incentives to help the district achieve its early college goals. For example, Hidalgo encourages all teachers to advance their own careers by earning their master’s and, if they qualify, teaching college courses at the high school.

This paper begins looking at Hidalgo’s key recruitment strategies and closes by examining the district’s retention efforts.

Recruitment Strategies Based on Teamwork and Directed Toward Early College

Hidalgo’s strategies for recruitment did not develop overnight. Rather, they evolved over the past decade as the district increasingly focused on advancing student achievement. This focus helped lead the district, five years ago, to adopt a district-wide early college approach. Becoming an early college district raised the bar for everyone—students, parents, teachers, counselors, administrators, and all support staff—concerning their roles in meeting the district’s goals for student success. In turn, this created a need for highly effective teachers who are committed not just to prepare all students to graduate, but also to support them as they earn college credits while in high school.

In its first years as an early college district, Hidalgo developed its recruitment strategies by identifying and building on its two core strengths: a team-oriented workplace driven toward student success, and a strong vision of college course-taking for all high school students. Over the past five years, the district has gained a reputation for these attributes, which has helped the district attract the teachers it needs.

CREATING A SUPPORTIVE TEACHER CULTURE

“Building trust is crucial. You have to listen. You have to understand your teachers. You have to be comfortable with two-way communications. If I had moved on to other districts, my priority would be to get to know teachers very well, very quickly. You have to build up internal communications, so people feel comfortable talking to you.”

Former Superintendent Ed Blaha



A Team-Oriented Workplace Driven Toward Student Success

At the center of Hidalgo’s approach to attracting excellent teachers are its efforts to develop a school and district culture where everyone pitches in to achieve high standards of student success. Employees at all levels, from associate superintendents to bus drivers and from teachers to office clerks, describe Hidalgo as a district in which everyone is focused on student achievement—and the contribution of each person is valued.

Bishakha Mukherji, who teaches English at the high school, described the district’s standards and expectations by raising her arm so that her palm, though parallel with the floor, was above her head. “This is our goal,” she said. “Expectations are set high.” She also said that the district achieves its goals by supporting and engaging teachers: “We are included in the decisions that are made. They take our input. We work together to come up with ideas or ways to solve things. It’s very supportive.”

As a result of its approach, the district has gained a reputation for a team culture that supports teachers in advancing student success. According to former Superintendent Ed Blaha, “The teachers here, they truly understand that their expertise is valued. Other teachers hear about how we treat people here. We’ve gained a reputation.”

In its recruitment efforts, the district has used this reputation to appeal to teachers who are committed to helping students

succeed. Marilu Navarro, former principal of Hidalgo High School, said that in recruiting new teachers and working with current teachers, she tries to appeal to their best instincts about what gets them excited about teaching. She said that many districts assume “that high school teachers are not receptive or will say no the quickest to new tasks.” But Hidalgo’s approach is different; in her recruitment interviews, she looks for each teacher’s openness to change. For instance, she asks how they have adjusted instruction based on student needs, and how they have worked with other teachers and administrators to identify student learning gaps. “Are they going to resist?” she said. “Or are they going to try some new things?”

As with all districts, Hidalgo engages in short-term recruitment efforts to inform prospective teachers about open positions: job fairs, in-house and external advertising, both online and through traditional venues. The district networks in the community to widen its reach in getting the word out about open positions. Hidalgo’s community ties appeal to many prospective teachers. As an early college district, Hidalgo also reaches out to its college and university networks to help identify and recruit promising candidates.

While these short-term strategies have been important, it’s the district’s long-term success in building its reputation that has made the recruitment process easier. According to Alvin Samano, assistant superintendent for human resources and mayor pro tem of the City of Hidalgo, “We’re all a team. The culture is very positive... I think that has a lot of positive effects on teachers wanting to work here. When I think about the teachers who come here, they come here because they’ve heard about Hidalgo.”

Renee Palacios, a teacher at the high school in her third year, chose Hidalgo because of its high expectations of students and teachers, and its supportive work environment. She is as enthusiastic about it today as she was three years ago. “It’s a place where you want to come to work,” she said, “because of the students, your co-workers, and the administration.”

A Strong Vision of College Credits for All High School Students

In addition to its supportive teaching culture, Hidalgo’s strong vision of college success for *all* is a central component of its recruitment efforts. When district leaders are recruiting new teachers, for example, they look for evidence—in resumes, interviews, and support letters—that they are committed to helping *all* students prepare for and achieve college success.

In particular, district leaders have found that it is crucial to be forthcoming with teacher candidates about the challenges of supporting Hidalgo’s students in earning college credits. They emphasize that Hidalgo’s students have humble backgrounds and little, if any, experience with college. About 85 percent of Hidalgo families speak Spanish in their homes and less than one in five adults have completed college. As a result, many students need extra support, during the summers and after school, to prepare for and successfully complete college classes.

According to Ms. Navarro, being forthright about the challenges during job interviews attracts those teachers who are aligned with the district’s mission. “The extra hours after school turns

some people away," she said. "But they're probably better off at another district."

"The work is difficult," said former superintendent Blaha. "But the opportunity to prepare students to take college courses, the opportunity for teachers to [earn their master's degree and] teach college courses, that is a big attraction to some people. They know when they come to this district, that they don't just teach to a state assessment."

Pay scales and benefit structures also are important in recruiting teachers, but appear to play a secondary role compared with opportunities for supporting college success for all. "There are higher-paying districts near here," said Ms. Mukherji, "but people come here because of the school culture, the support."

This year, for example, a prospective teacher of environmental science received a higher offer from a district that was closer to his home. Due to local teacher shortages in science, environmental science positions are often difficult to fill. According to Ms. Navarro, the other district offered the teacher \$4,000 more than Hidalgo could pay. "I thought I'd lost him," said Navarro. "But he took a tour of the campus, at his own pace. And I think he appreciated the positive work environment."

The teacher chose Hidalgo.

Retention Strategies Aligned with College for All

To support teacher retention, Hidalgo has created programs and incentives that help the district reach its goals for student achievement. For new instructors, the district has a series of structures in place to connect them immediately to a community of colleagues dedicated to student success. As teachers remain in the district, ongoing teacher incentives help the district achieve its early college mission.

An induction and mentorship program provides all new teachers with support early in their careers. First-year teachers are assigned to a teacher/leader on their campus who meets with them regularly and offers instructional guidance and support. In addition, each teacher, as part of their department, is linked with an assistant principal who can provide additional feedback and assistance.

According to Ms. Palacios, "As a first-year teacher, they guided me with whatever I needed. I had a mentor who helped me every step of the way: lesson plans, grade book. It really helped. My co-workers offered supplies and materials. They let me observe their classes to get ideas. And the administration helped me relax; I wanted to do such a good job. It was very easy to talk to my principal at any time. I felt very welcomed."

For their first three years, new teachers from across the district also meet together once a month with a professional development expert and with district leaders. These trainings offer instructional development aligned with the district's goals, while also helping teachers build relationships across the district.

In addition to providing supports for new teachers, the Hidalgo ISD has incentive structures to retain teachers and encourage them to meet the district's early college goals. For example, the district offers pay incentives for teachers to earn master's degrees and teach college courses to high school students.

Teachers who earn their master's and qualify as adjunct instructors from a local college can teach college courses on the high school campus.

For the district, these incentives are cost effective because they can reduce the cost of transporting students to a college campus for those courses. For teachers, these policies provide career advancement while helping to raise the level of instructional expertise at the high school. According to Ms. Mukherji, who has a master's degree in English and teaches high school and college courses at the high school campus, "Most of the teachers who are here, they are going for their master's degree because

BEING CLEAR ABOUT THE CHALLENGES

"When you are honest [to prospective teachers] about the challenges—and not just in high school, but how do we prepare them for the next level of education and the workforce? When you present that to a teacher, that appeals to them. They're helping another human being. They want to contribute to that. That's the work we do at Hidalgo Early College High School."

Former Principal Marilu Navarro



they want to be able to teach college courses. They see others teaching a college course, and they want to do it. Going to college also widens our horizons. I think we inspire each other."

The district's performance-based pay system also provides teachers with incentives to work together to meet their school's goals. The performance-based system is voluntary, but most teachers participate in order to qualify for the additional pay of \$1,500 if the school receives an Exemplary rating from the state. One of the key components of the performance system is geared to early college goals.



“It’s about giving credit to every teacher playing a role in the overall performance of the school,” said Mr. Samano. “If I as a teacher say, yes, I’ll be tutoring after hours or I’ll be doing this or that, then at the end of the year, if they do that work and the campus gets exemplary status, they get to benefit financially.”

According to Ms. Navarro, the performance-based system acknowledges teachers’ contributions to the overall mission of the district. “It’s a recognition of what they do every single day,” she said.

RETENTION STRATEGIES FOR NEW TEACHERS

The Hidalgo ISD engages new teachers in activities that connect them to a school community driven toward student success. For example, the district:

- Pairs each new teacher with a master teacher
 - Invites the teachers to community events outside the school
 - Arranges visits to the teacher’s classroom and invites the teacher to visit other classrooms
 - Requires teacher participation in weekly departmental meetings focusing on instruction and student interventions
 - Supports instructional development through districtwide meetings with new teachers
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INCENTIVES ALIGNED WITH EARLY COLLEGE

As part of its retention strategies, Hidalgo offers incentives that support its early college mission:

- Annual bonus for teachers earning college credits toward a master’s degree, starting at \$500 for 6 hours earned, \$1,000 for 21 hours, and up to \$1,500 for 36+ hours earned.
 - Annual bonus of \$3,000 for teachers who have earned their master’s in their teaching field.
 - Additional \$500 bonus per semester for college courses taught at the high school.
 - Up to \$1,500 performance-pay bonus if school receives Exemplary rating from the state.
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Building on Its Reputation

The Hidalgo ISD has become well-known for its supportive, team-oriented teaching culture and for its successes in helping all students earn college credits while in high school. Hidalgo has combined these two strengths to create the kind of district that challenges students to excel, that invites parents to become involved, and that inspires teachers to work together—and even to teach college classes—to help students succeed in college. The result is that Hidalgo’s reputation has become a powerful recruitment tool in itself.

“We’ve got a total early college concept,” said Mr. Samano, referring to the role of early college in contributing to teacher recruitment and retention. “That’s a big part of the total picture. The word got out.”