

# Hidalgo Sets Sail

## A School District Supports All Students in Earning College Credits



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BY THAD R. NODINE

**W**hen 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 zigzags of trailer parks, and the flat rooftops of apartment build-

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ings, 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 about 3,500 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



ILLUSTRATIONS BY SCOTT MCKOWEN

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 expect all students to earn college credits—including credits in career-focused college programs—while in high school. The demographics of Hidalgo's student body—99 percent Hispanic, 89 percent economically disadvantaged, and 53 percent English language learner—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 want 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 Texas Higher Education Assessment (which determines if students are ready for college-level work, be they high school students entering dual-enrollment programs or college freshmen) and a parental



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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.

The story of how this district took up the mantle of providing college credits for all its students—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.

### Becoming an Early College District

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.

King also instituted 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 (85 percent of whom speak Spanish at home); 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.

In 2005, 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 under way at the district. “We were already committed to innovation and reform and to college for every student,” he said.

Although the goals and student profile for the early college concept fit Hidalgo's needs, there was one major obstacle: early college programs had not been developed to serve all students throughout a district. Across the country, early college schools included standalone high schools, schools within larger high schools, and schools located on college campuses—but all these

\*For more on Hidalgo's student body, see the Texas Education Agency's Education at a Glance: School District Summary, Hidalgo, January 2011, <http://loving1.tea.state.tx.us/onestar/Reports/Summary2010/District/AAG1-DIST-SchoolDist-PDF-en-us-108905.pdf>.

†The district has one traditional high school, Hidalgo Early College High School, and one small alternative high school, Hidalgo Academy.

models used 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 junior high school and then into Hidalgo High School, which has about 900 students. The traditional early college model meant that more than half of the high school would be left out. “My concept has always been to focus on all the kids,” King said.

The funding guidelines from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation clearly called for a small-schools approach, but the foundation eventually approved the proposal. “If we want to really transform schools, this is an opportunity to do that,” King said. “Basically, that got the green light.”

As the district and its postsecondary partner, UT-Pan American, began implementing a district-wide 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 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.

Edward Blaha, who was the principal at Hidalgo High School when the early college program started and then was the superintendent from 2009 to 2011, 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,



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because we learned along the path. We learned together.”

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, then the 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, 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.” 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.”

\*Some special education students were not able to earn college credits. However, many special education students do earn college credits. Of the 52 high school students in special education in the 2009–2010 school year, 24 earned college credits.

Hidalgo’s administrators and teachers, however, emphasized that in graduating their first early college class, their work has only begun. For example, Blaha noted that the district has expanded the number of students taking SAT and ACT tests; for the class of 2009, 86 percent of Hidalgo’s students took the SAT or the ACT, compared with 62 percent statewide.<sup>§</sup> Now the district is working to improve the test scores, which still lag behind the state’s scores, partly because so many students are tested. “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.”



### Creating a College-Going Culture

When the 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

<sup>§</sup>Texas Education Agency, “2009–2010 Academic Excellence Indicator System, District Reports: PDF, Hidalgo,” section I, page 13, report generated on June 23, 2011, through <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/perfreport/aeis/2010/district.srch.html>.

designing comprehensive supports for students. In addition, they believed that for these innovations to succeed, 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.

Many families with children in Hidalgo live in *colonias* at the edges of agricultural fields, where rows of sub-standard 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.

For example, Salinas Elementary School, which serves students in prekindergarten through fifth grade, has colorful pictures of children in school uniforms 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, both in-state—University of North Texas, UT-Austin, Texas A&M—and far away—Harvard, Yale, Stanford, Notre Dame, North Carolina, Michigan, Colorado. 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



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get to wear their T-shirts instead of their school uniforms.

Salinas is not just encouraging students, it's preparing them too. 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.” 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. The school also has ramped up and given a special name, “Building Scholars,” to its tutoring program in literacy and writing that helps kids reach proficiency. 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 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, which serves all of the sixth- through eighth-graders in the district, 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, and 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; 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,” 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 mathematics). The program includes more than 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: business and marketing; industrial and engineering technology; health science and technology; human development management and services; and personal and protective services. Counselors also meet with parents to explain the high school's handbook of classes, which resembles the catalogs that colleges provide, with course descriptions and pathways leading toward specialties.

As at the elementary and junior high schools, college and career information is displayed throughout the Hidalgo High School 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 asks, "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 high schools, Hidalgo has an annual College Night, in which representatives from colleges and universities 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, during 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.

The district's focus on education and careers helps provide *all* students with post-secondary options. "There is no difference between career tech as college and UT as

college," said Blaha, the former superintendent. "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."

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. 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 has hired 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.

The district also 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. 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, Sandra Martinez (a parent of an eleventh-grader and two graduates of Hidalgo High School) 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."

### Developing Strong College Partnerships

To help students succeed 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 align coursework and comprehensive supports. The president of UT-Pan American at the time, Blandina Cárdenas, provided visible leadership. In addition, the University of Texas 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,



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CLOCKWISE, BEGINNING UPPER LEFT: PHOTO © JENNIFER VILLARREAL; PHOTO BY MICHAEL STRAVATO / © 2010 JOBS FOR THE FUTURE; PHOTO © DIAZ JR. HIGH MEDIA CLUB

where Senior Vice Provost for Undergraduate Studies, Academic Assessment and Retention Ana Maria Rodriguez has directed the early college program since its inception. During the planning year, 2005–2006, 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 junior high school, changes in professional development, logistical issues, and other components of early college.

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. 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."

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."

One of the first major challenges that the team from Hidalgo and UT-Pan American faced in creating an early college district was developing a range of postsecondary options for students who were not interested in pursuing a four-year degree. "When

we started this partnership," said 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 with South Texas College and Texas State Technical College in Harlingen. South Texas College now serves as Hidalgo's primary postsecondary partner.

For Hidalgo students who have passed the Texas Higher Education Assessment, the state-required college-readiness assessment, UT-Pan American 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—in aviation mechanics, nursing, and computer-assisted design, among others—lead to certificates or degrees. 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.

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 American 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 American and South Texas College, Hidalgo teachers who have master's degrees in their teaching field can apply to become affiliated faculty. 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 receive only 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.

The difference between high school and college, said Lyn Onato, a high school mathematics instructor affiliated with South Texas College, is that high school students are surrounded by support sys-

tems that they're familiar with, and teachers understand their needs. "We follow the syllabus," she said. "But we give them more support."

### Aligning Courses and Career Pathways for College Success

Hidalgo's efforts to create better aligned and more rigorous courses 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 junior high and high school teachers—in language arts, mathematics, science, and social studies—worked during the summers of 2008 and 2009 to "backwards map" curricular requirements from eleventh grade to sixth grade so students would be prepared to take college courses by their junior year.

In the junior high 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 former 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."

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). Students who pass sections of the test can begin taking transfer-level college courses in the areas that they have passed.† The high school uses THEA results to plan accelerated, pre-AP, and AP coursework as well as supports that lead all students toward earning college credits by graduation. 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.

†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.



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### Developing Comprehensive Student Supports

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.

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 Lamos, a high school counselor for six years and a math teacher for twelve, "Our job probably tripled." Beginning in junior high school, counselors meet with students and parents to explain 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

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\*Hidalgo students take college classes for free. But for the Hidalgo school district, there are three key costs 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 charge 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.

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and career plans along the way.

Former Hidalgo High School principal Marilu Navarro, who has also served as the school's college-readiness coordinator, said that a hands-on approach has been vital for the students. For example, she said that students rushed into her office 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. She suggested they start a study group, and helped them learn to outline and discuss their assigned readings. Once they 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.'"

Besides having a wide range of counseling options, Hidalgo's students also have access to a wide range of academic interventions outside of class. In 2009–2010, the junior high school changed its school day to create an advisory period. 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 (the state assessment for school accountability) 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. Bishakha Mukherji, who teaches English, said, "Many [students] don't have computers at home, so we stay as long as they need."

### Moving Forward

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 has ended. 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 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."

Carlos Cardoza, treasurer of the school board and a trustee for 14 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 had to take remedial classes, which have 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." In contrast, "These kids now that graduate, they're ready," he said. "We may not be a big school, but our kids are doing all right. That's why we call this a little treasure on the border." □

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