

Early College District Program

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Early college programs are “schools within a school,” offering a wide-ranging curriculum of college and high school course work woven into a single program.¹ Students in early college programs typically do not have to meet traditional college academic eligibility criteria, which often constitute a barrier to success given the high rates of remediation for first-year college students.² Research on the benefits of an early college education shows promise; early college students are more likely to enroll in and persist through college than non-early college students.³ Additionally, evidence suggests that underrepresented groups, including students from low-income families and students of color, typically benefit the most from these initiatives.⁴

Early College in Pharr–San Juan–Alamo Independent School District (Texas)

The opportunity to provide that benefit was the impetus behind the creation of the Pharr–San Juan–Alamo Independent School District’s (PSJA’s) early college initiative. Located roughly ten miles from the Mexican border along the Rio Grande River, PSJA serves the cities of Pharr, San Juan, and Alamo, Texas. The district’s demographics reveal a student body that is 99 percent Latino, 41 percent English language learners, and 88 percent recipients of free or reduced-price lunch. With poverty rates in the three cities between 30 percent and 35 percent, and with 73.1 percent of students deemed academically at risk, the district serves some of the nation’s most disadvantaged families.⁵ In addition, the district has experienced a significant school dropout problem. Prior to implementing the early college initiative, the district estimated losing up to 500 students annually.⁶

To reduce the barriers to success for students, the district, equipped with a \$2 million college-readiness planning grant from the Texas Education Agency, partnered with Educate Texas⁷ and Jobs for the Future to develop a portfolio of “college-ready, college-connected” schools. The strategy consists of four core components:⁸

1. Rigorous college-ready instruction in all middle and high schools
2. Career and technical education (CTE) pathways aligned with the local economy’s needs

3. District-sponsored counseling located on college campuses to support recent high school graduates in the transition from high school to college
4. Schools designed specifically for off-track youth and dropouts

The process begins in ninth grade. Students are required to take an introductory course that explores six career clusters that the district offers. By the end of ninth grade, students choose a career cluster with assistance from school counselors. Through tenth grade, students receive an introduction to the working principles that govern their chosen career cluster, thus establishing the foundation from which to choose a more specialized career pathway as upperclassmen. Eleventh- and twelfth-grade students undertake college-level courses in coordination with the district’s college partners: South Texas College and the University of Texas–Pan American. The goal is for seniors to graduate with six or more transferrable college credits in their career pathways.⁹

Reengaging School Dropouts

In addition to creating career pathways, the district developed a reengagement strategy to address the dropout problem. PSJA leveraged the state’s dropout-prevention and student-recovery grants to create the College, Career, and Technology Academy (CCTA), a dropout-recovery high school. CCTA serves off-track and former dropouts who are close to graduation. Students complete only those high school courses needed for graduation, and then they begin compressed college-level credit-bearing courses in their chosen CTE cluster.¹⁰

While the district’s early college and career pathways have not been subject to a rigorous evaluation, the following self-reported student outcomes indicate that PSJA’s early college initiative shows promise:¹¹

- The district raised its four-year high school graduation rate from 62 percent in School Year (SY) 2006–07 to 90 percent in SY 2013–14.

- In SY 2010–11, 1,700 PSJA high school students (22 percent) took college courses from South Texas College and other college partners. By SY 2013–14, that number rose to 2,800 (33 percent of students).
- In 2013, 103 graduating seniors (5 percent of that year's graduating class) received an associate's degree or college-level certification. By 2014, that number increased to 370 (21 percent of the graduating class).
- Since 2007, CCTA has graduated 1,000 former high school dropouts and the annual district dropout rate has fallen by 75 percent.¹²

Challenges to this model do exist. First, there is disagreement in the field as to whether the economy can sustain jobs that pay a medium wage for skill levels that lie between strong high school/entry-level CTE training and graduate degree preparation.¹³ Second, there is emergent evidence that focusing on vocational training over general education may prevent workers from acquiring skills needed for future employment.¹⁴ Finally, although anecdotal in nature, some higher education administrators have criticized this particular program's quality.¹⁵

Guiding Questions

- Does the district have the capacity to offer both high-quality general education and vocational training to students?
- Does the district have sufficient financial resources available, or the ability to acquire necessary resources, to support a districtwide early college initiative?



Endnotes

- ¹ A. Berger et al., *Early College, Continued Success: Early College High School Initiative Impact Study* (Washington, DC: American Institutes for Research, 2014), http://www.air.org/sites/default/files/AIR_ECHSI_Impact_Study_Report-_NSC_Update_01-14-14.pdf.
- ² L. Jimenez et al., *Remedial Education: The Cost of Catching Up* (Washington, DC: Center for American Progress, 2016), <https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education/reports/2016/09/28/144000/remedial-education/>.
- ³ Berger et al., *Early College, Continued Success*.
- ⁴ Metis Associates, "Equity & Excellence" (New York, NY: Bard Early Colleges, 2015), <http://online.pubhtml5.com/klst/izem/#p=1>; Berger et al., *Early College, Continued Success*.
- ⁵ U.S. Census Bureau, "QuickFacts: Alamo City, Texas; San Juan City, Texas; Pharr City, Texas," <https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/alamocitytexas,sanjuancitytexas,pharrcitytexas/PST045216> (accessed July 6, 2017).
- ⁶ J. Merrow, "In South Texas, Luring Dropouts Back By Sending Them to College," *PBS NewsHour*, July 4, 2012, http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/american-graduate-july-dec12-amgrad_07-04/.
- ⁷ Educate Texas is a public-private initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas that works statewide to increase postsecondary readiness for students from low-income families.
- ⁸ C. Le, *Launching Early College Districtwide: Pharr–San Juan–Alamo's "College for All" Strategy* (Washington, DC: Jobs for the Future, 2012), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED537264>.
- ⁹ C. Cahill et al., *State Strategies for Sustaining and Scaling Grades 9–14 Career Pathways: Toward a Policy Set for Pathways to Prosperity* (Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future and Pathways to Prosperity Network, 2014), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED561283>; Le, *Launching Early College Districtwide*.
- ¹⁰ Le, *Launching Early College Districtwide*.
- ¹¹ J. Vargas, *Sharing Responsibility for College Success: A Model Partnership Moves Students to Diplomas and Degrees* (Jobs for the Future, 2014), <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED561292>.
- ¹² Jobs for the Future, "Success Story: Pharr–San Juan–Alamo Independent School District," <http://www.jff.org/services/early-college-design-services/success-stories> (accessed July 7, 2017).
- ¹³ E. A. Hanushek, "German-Style Apprenticeships Simply Can't Be Replicated," *Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2017, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/german-style-apprenticeships-simply-cant-be-replicated-1497821588>; T. A. Kochan, D. Finegold, and P. Osterman, "Who Can Fix the 'Middle-Skills' Gap?," *Harvard Business Review*, December 1, 2012, <https://hbr.org/2012/12/who-can-fix-the-middle-skills-gap>.
- ¹⁴ E. A. Hanushek and L. Woessmann, "Apprenticeship Programs in a Changing Economic World," *Brown Center Chalkboard* (blog), Brookings Institution, June 28, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/brown-center-chalkboard/2017/06/28/apprenticeship-programs-in-a-changing-economic-world/>.
- ¹⁵ N. Morton, "Early College, Early Failure?," *The (McAllen) Monitor*, February 4, 2012, http://www.themonitor.com/article_98f3d6c7-d018-579c-aaf5-ef6d3f1db421.html.

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