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District Excellence in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas

A Case Study of Four High Performing Districts

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Acknowledgments

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Introduction

Low socioeconomic conditions have been associated with low academic performance for several decades, a conclusion bolstered by numerous studies dating back to the War on Poverty in the 1960s. With a focus on poverty, the U.S. Congress adopted legislation in 1965 that included Title I, Part A, designed to provide funds to local education agencies to offer financial support to schools with high numbers of children from low-income families. More than 50 years later, that funding remains in place, and many districts around the country and in Texas qualify for it.

Some of those Title I schools have reached achievement levels well above what was expected given their levels of poverty. In Texas, these schools receive official designations as Reward Schools for demonstrating high academic performance, high academic progress, or both. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) sought to understand this phenomenon and study Reward Schools as part of an effort to help low-performing schools improve achievement.

Beginning in 2014, TEA partnered with the Texas Comprehensive Center (TXCC) at the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and the Texas Center for District and School Support at Region 13 Education Service Center (ESC) to study high academic performance in Title I schools in Texas. This effort began as a case study of high-performance and high-progress Title I Reward Schools across the state.

Texas

Rio Grande Valley
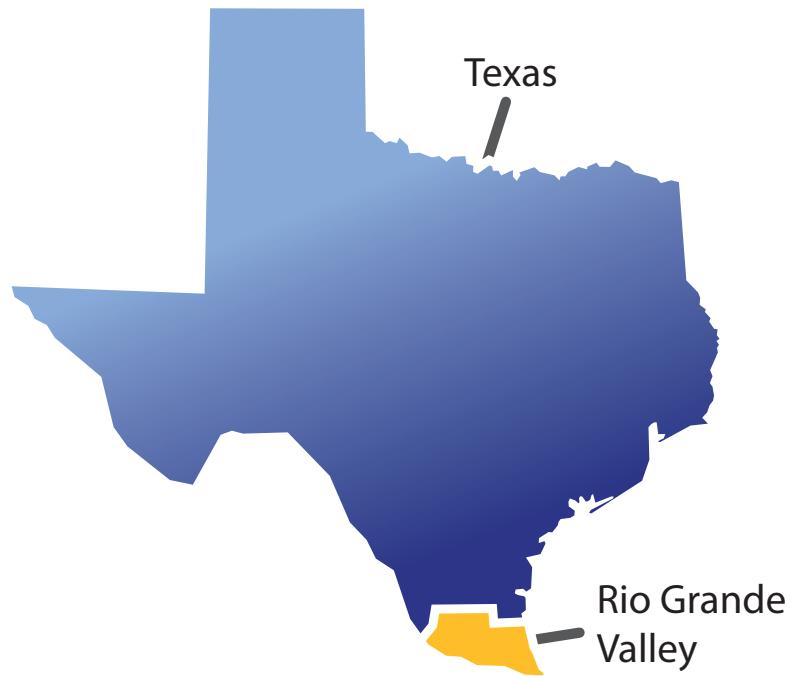
When researchers consulted a map of Reward Schools in Texas to ensure a distribution of case study schools around the state, they noticed some concentrations of Reward Schools, primarily in urban areas. The heaviest concentration was in far South Texas—known as the Rio Grande Valley—despite the region's equally high concentrations of poverty. This concentration of Reward Schools was located mainly in areas where there were more economic resources and alongside pockets of poverty. As a result of these findings, the study team decided to supplement two years of Reward Schools studies with a third year of study at the district level. This district-level study would be focused on the Rio Grande Valley.

One finding from the Reward Schools Case Studies Project was the essential role of district support systems in cultivating successful campuses and fostering student achievement. TXCC researchers found that all the selected Reward Schools operated within supportive districts or regional governing bodies. This finding further encouraged TEA and TXCC to examine the systems and practices of districts with high concentrations of successful Title I schools. With this goal in mind, the District Excellence Study was initiated. This study examined four districts, which provided their perspectives on effective practices for high performance.
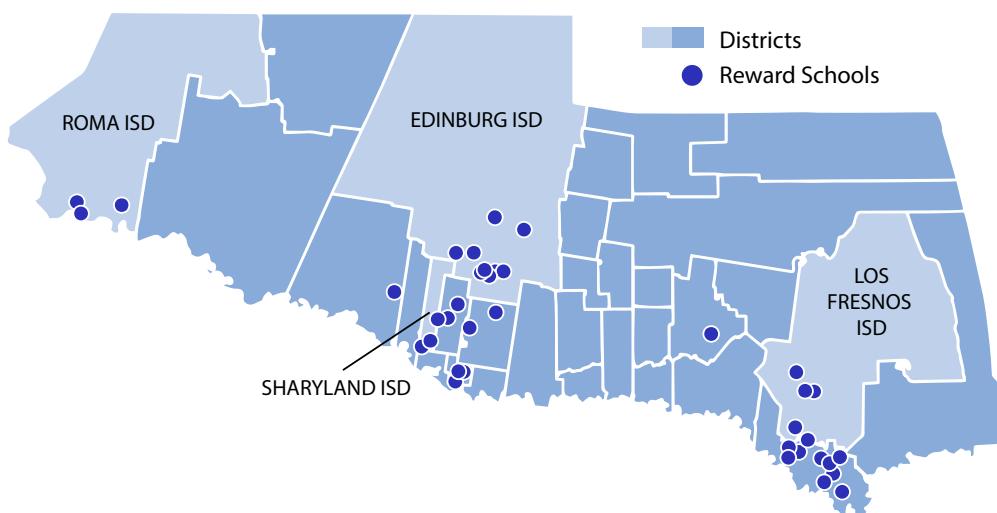
The four districts selected for this study were chosen because they had at least 25 percent of their campuses designated as high performance or high progress in the previous three academic years, had one or no campuses with Improvement Required designations, and represented different areas of the Rio Grande Valley. Edinburg, the largest of the districts, is in a high-population center and somewhat centered in the lower Rio Grande Valley. Los Fresnos, the furthest east of the four communities, is relatively suburban and located next to Brownsville, which is the largest population center in the lower Rio Grande Valley. Roma, the smallest community, is situated to the west of the other districts in a somewhat rural setting. Sharyland, centrally located among the four districts, is one of two independent districts within a community.

The TEA/TXCC team conducted 92 interviews in these four districts and at the Region 1 ESC, which serves the districts. Participants included primary and secondary teachers and principals; district administrators such as superintendents, chief academic officers, chief operations officers, and board members; district leaders for curriculum and instruction, professional development, human resources, finance, operations, special education, federal programs, and family engagement; and Region 1 ESC staff.

Region 1 ESC

Located in the Rio Grande Valley of South Texas on the border between the United States and Mexico, the Region 1 ESC is one of 20 regional education service centers in the state. Originally created by the 59th Texas Legislature, these centers work with school districts to "assist school districts in improving student performance in each region of the system; enable school districts to operate more efficiently and economically; and implement initiatives assigned by the legislature or commissioner" (Region 1 Education Service Center, 2016). Under the leadership of the Region 1 ESC executive director, Cornelio Gonzalez, PhD, the ESC views its mission as being to "serve educators, students, and parents by providing cutting-edge professional development, customized technical assistance, innovative products, and excellent services to improve student outcomes, enable districts to operate efficiently and economically, and implement state initiatives" (Region 1 Education Service Center, 2016). To this end, the Region 1 ESC offers a variety of in-person workshops and online courses to provide professional development for teachers as well as district and school administrators. In addition to hosting learning communities and providing professional development, the Region 1 ESC also offers a variety of programs to support school districts and charter systems in the area. These programs address food and nutrition, school health, parent involvement, and many more academic and nonacademic supports designed to provide resources to the districts the ESC serves.

The Region 1 ESC encompasses school districts and charter school systems in seven counties: Cameron, Hidalgo, Jim Hogg, Starr, Webb, Willacy, and Zapata. While the main office is located in Edinburg, the Region 1 ESC has extension offices in both Brownsville and Laredo. The total student enrollment for schools within Region 1 ESC is more than 430,020 in 37 school districts and charter school systems with a total of 639 campuses across the region. Of those students enrolled in Region 1 districts, 97 percent are Hispanic and 3 percent are other ethnicities, 85 percent are economically disadvantaged, 37 percent are enrolled in Limited English Proficiency (LEP) programs, and 8 percent are enrolled in special education. In 2015, all the districts in the Region 1 ESC service area received the Met Standard distinction and 76 percent of campuses received one or more distinctions, including the most Postsecondary Readiness distinctions in the state. In addition, the region had 61 designated Reward Schools in the 2014–15 school year.

Districts/Region ESC	Schools	Students	Full-time Employees	Student Demographics as percentage of total student populations				
				Hispanic	Other Ethnicities	Economically Disadvantaged	English Language Learners	Special Education
Edinburg CISD	36	34,400	4,800	97	3	85	32	6
Los Fresnos CISD	15	10,800	1,500	97	3	78	23	8
Roma ISD	10	6,400	1,000	100	0	88	67	5
Sharyland ISD	12	10,000	1,300	93	7	61	29	6
Region 1 ESC	639	430,020		97	3	85	37 LEP	8

Source: Texas Education Agency data and Region 1 ESC data

The districts discussed in this report are all successful, but their selection for this study should not be viewed as a rank ordering of districts in the Rio Grande Valley (the Valley). There are many districts in the Valley that are highly successful and could inform a study such as this one. These four districts were

chosen not only because they are high performing but also because they represent a variety of locales (urban, suburban, and rural) and the rich diversity of the Rio Grande Valley.

A description of each of the four participating districts is provided with a discussion of the highlights of their key practices for district success. The data collected in the interviews during this study indicate a clear pattern of practices and philosophies. Educators in the Valley reject the notion that poverty equates to poor academic performance. They believe, and teach their children, that they are as good as anyone else in the country. In conducting their work, the districts' educators and administrators consistently engage in 12 key practices of high-performing districts.

Key Practices in Successful Districts

The underlying framework for the Reward Schools Case Studies Project was based on TEA's theory of action for turning around low-performing schools: the Texas Accountability Intervention System (TAIS). TAIS aligns with the U.S. Department of Education's school turnaround principles through seven critical success factors (CSFs): improve academic performance, increase use of data to drive instruction, increase leadership effectiveness, increase learning time, increase family and community engagement, improve school climate, and increase teacher quality (see the Appendix for a description of each CSF). These CSFs guided the development of the research design and instruments for the case studies project as did the TAIS conceptualization of district support systems.

Prior to entering the field, the TXCC research team synthesized TAIS, the CSFs, and literature from a variety of sources to develop a framework of potential indicators of high district performance (see Appendix). These indicators were created based on an extensive review of existing literature on district success and formed the basis of the researchers' interview and focus group protocols. The four districts in this study demonstrated proficiency in 12 practices commonly correlated to success. Those key practices are listed below.

- *Strategic plan:* The district has a strategic plan that specifies long-range goals and objectives, allocates its resources to implement the plan effectively, and routinely monitors progress to promote accountability and ensure effectiveness. A detailed strategic plan provides districts with a roadmap for accountability.

- *Organizational coherence:* The district ensures organizational coherence in its structures and processes. With organizational coherence, districts are able to effectively execute the strategic plan, coordinate services, and maintain equity across the schools in their system.

- *Leadership:* The district provides strong, visionary superintendents and cohesive school boards with aligned priorities. Strong leaders are able to unify school boards and provide direction to district- and school-level administrators.

- *Curriculum:* The district has a rigorous, effectively articulated standards-based curriculum and sufficient materials and curricular supports to implement the curriculum effectively. A rigorous, standards-based curriculum is an essential component of strong instruction and helps hold districts accountable for student achievement on assessments.

▶ *Instruction:* The district implements rigorous evidence-based differentiated instruction aligned to state content standards. Differentiated instruction ensures students at all levels of learning receive the support they need to thrive in the districts' school system.

▶ *Family and community engagement:* The district creates processes and programs to effectively engage families and the surrounding community. Successful family and community engagement unites stakeholders around the districts' students and provides them with ongoing in- and out-of-school academic and nonacademic support.

▶ *Professional development:* The district has effective professional learning processes in place to support administrator and teacher growth and performance. Delivering appropriate professional development to district staff at all levels ensures systems run smoothly, instruction is effective, and individual growth is supported.

▶ *Collaboration:* The district has effective processes to promote collaboration to enhance teaching and learning at all levels. Collaboration provides embedded professional development, promotes district organizational coherence, and is one component of a positive climate.

▶ *Data use:* The district has effective systems and processes to help administrators and teachers analyze and use data for decision making. Frequent data monitoring at the district and school levels is essential for accountability and provides stakeholders with evidence to make informed decisions.

▶ *College and career readiness:* The district ensures that all schools promote college and career readiness. Encouraging college and career aspirations establishes high expectations for students, prepares students for life outside of the school district, and discourages dropouts.

▶ *Student academic supports:* The district ensures that every school has an effective support system to facilitate the academic improvement of all students. Effective and equitable student academic supports allow students from all subpopulations and at all levels to achieve.

▶ *Student nonacademic supports:* The district provides effective supports to meet students' nonacademic needs. Effective nonacademic supports address issues that may be barriers to academic success, including mental and physical health needs. These supports often include character development and civic engagement and encourage the support of whole child development.

The list is non-exhaustive, and the 12 key practices included in this report represent only the most common attributes shared by the four identified districts. This report presents the results from qualitative analyses of the interviews and focus groups with district staff, school principals and teachers, and Region 1 ESC staff. For a deeper understanding of how these practices operate in districts, the next section provides a literature review of some of the research that supports each practice.

Literature Review

Strategic Planning. Research on district performance has codified the processes associated with effective strategic planning. Studies have shown that the most effective superintendents include multiple stakeholder groups, such as central office staff, campus administrators, and board members, in establishing nonnegotiable goals for their districts (Waters & Marzano, 2006). In 2017, Hanover Research

identified the most common components of a kindergarten through grade 12 strategic plan, including an overall vision and mission, goals for the district, and measurements for achieving goals with a timeline and benchmarks. Strategic planning processes often involve input from key stakeholder groups, including district leadership, school administrators, teachers, parents, students, and community members. Planning groups often create action groups to address specific needs (Hanover Research, 2013). Consistent with the literature, the high-performing districts in this study have strategic plans that specify long-range goals and objectives, allocate resources to implement the plan effectively, and routinely monitor progress to promote accountability and ensure effectiveness. In these districts, a detailed strategic plan provides districts with a roadmap for accountability.

Organizational Coherence. Research on district improvement and success has concluded that organizational coherence is essential to student achievement. A 2013 analysis of 50 district effectiveness studies showed that organizational coherence was identified as a correlate of improved test scores in about 70 percent of the studies (Trujillo, 2013). Organizational coherence in the context of district excellence means that the various departments and stakeholders are "sensibly arranged and mutually reinforcing, the system makes progress toward its goal of improving instruction and learning for every child in the school" (Johnson, Marietta, Higgins, Mapp, & Grossman, 2015). In this study, all four Valley districts ensure organizational coherence in their structures and processes. With organizational coherence, these districts are able to effectively execute the strategic plan, coordinate services, and maintain equity across the schools in their system.

Leadership. School turnaround literature suggests that leadership is the primary catalyst for school improvement (Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, & Wahlstrom, 2004). A 2006 study found a positive correlation between district leadership and student achievement, with statistically significant correlations between student academic achievement and five district-level leadership responsibilities: collaborative goal setting, nonnegotiable goals for achievement and instruction, board alignment and support of district goals, monitoring goals for achievement and instruction, and use of resources to support achievement and instructional goals (Waters & Marzano, 2006). The districts in this study have strong, visionary superintendents and cohesive school boards with aligned priorities. The district leaders are able to unify school boards and provide direction to district- and school-level administrators.

Curriculum. Research supports a clear association between standards-aligned curriculum and test scores (Trujillo, 2013). Benefits increase when curriculum is aligned with instruction (Lauer et al., 2005). The high-performing districts in this study have rigorous, effectively articulated standards-based curricula and sufficient materials and curricular supports for effective implementation. For these districts, a rigorous, standards-based curriculum is an essential component of strong instruction and helps hold districts accountable for student achievement on assessments.

Instruction. District and school policies—such as the amount of time expected for differentiated instruction, tools available through the curriculum, and adoption of online programs—have been found to influence teacher use of differentiated instruction (Park & Datnow, 2017). In addition, a comprehensive literature review on the role of the district central office in improving instruction found that districts with high student achievement assumed the responsibility of decision making about curriculum and instruction and supported good instructional practice through high-reliability recruitment of principals and teachers and professional development for principals and teachers (Mac Iver & Farley, 2003). The four districts

in this study implement rigorous, evidence-based differentiated instruction aligned to state content standards. To support differentiated instruction, the districts provide professional development to instructors and monitor curriculum implementation and instruction consistently throughout the school year.

Family and Community Engagement. Literature on student achievement indicates that family involvement in children's education both at home and in school is a significant indicator of student performance (Henderson & Mapp, 2002). In addition, research on the impact of community engagement with local schools has shown a positive relationship between engaging community members and student achievement (Kirby & DiPaola, 2011). Family and community engagement are essential to the districts in this study. All have created processes and programs to effectively engage families and the surrounding community. In these districts, successful family and community engagement unites stakeholders around the districts' students and provides them with ongoing in- and out-of-school academic and nonacademic support.

Professional Development. Kraft, Blazar, and Hogan's (2016) meta-analysis of 37 studies found that teacher coaching had a positive association with student achievement. Trujillo (2013) had similar findings when analyzing 50 districts where professional development was associated with higher test scores. The high-performing districts in this study have effective professional learning processes in place to support administrator and teacher growth and performance. For these districts, delivering appropriate professional development to district staff at all levels ensures systems run smoothly, instruction is effective, and individual growth is supported.

Collaboration. Shannon and Bylsma (2004) analyzed more than 80 research reports and articles on characteristics of improved school districts. Several studies pointed to the importance of collaboration. For example, an evaluation of districts in Virginia concluded that high-scoring schools and schools that were successful despite demographic challenges reflected "teamwork, collaboration, and vertical integration" (Virginia Commonwealth, 2004, p. 68). In addition, a 2012 study on how district central offices support school improvement found that creating opportunities for school leaders to consult with colleagues was an important part of supporting educational leadership (Honig, 2012). The four Valley districts in this study have processes in place to promote collaboration to enhance teaching and learning at all levels. Collaboration in these districts provides embedded professional development, promotes organizational coherence, and is one component of a positive climate.

Data Use. The research literature holds that a tenet of high-performing districts is supporting their campuses in making evidence-based decisions by providing teachers with current research findings, expert consultants, and analytic capacity at the school level. To do this, districts provide schools with simplified results, assistance with data analysis, and professional development on evidence-based decision making (Leithwood, 2010). Education research also suggests that teachers and administrators are more likely to use data in their decision making if the data are accurate, complete, current, and relevant (Datnow & Park, 2014). The districts in this study have systems and processes to help administrators and teachers analyze and use data for decision making. In these districts, frequent data monitoring at the district and school levels is essential for accountability and provides stakeholders with evidence to make informed decisions.

College and Career Readiness. Recent literature indicates that students with access to rigorous coursework and relevant college and career opportunities (e.g., Advanced Placement and dual enrollment)

are more likely to experience improvements in work quality and achievement (McNeary, Snell, Lederhaus, Kotler, & Maloney, 2014). Similarly, a study from Hanover Research (2014) suggests that dual enrollment has a positive impact on students' readiness for postsecondary opportunities and creates a link to participating institutions. The districts in this study have specific strategies in place to ensure that all schools promote college and career readiness. Encouraging college and career aspirations in these districts has helped establish high expectations for students, prepare students for life outside of the school district, and discourage dropouts.

Student Academic Supports. A review of 16 response to intervention (RTI) field studies found that the RTI model—a multitiered process that includes systematic identification of learning needs and provision of small-group or individualized interventions—led to improved academic outcomes in at-risk students (Hughes & Dexter, 2010). To help address the needs of academically advanced students, experts at a recent gathering of the National Association for Gifted Children presented several of the best education practices for low-income, high-ability students. These practices include holistic, culturally responsive practices and services that focus on the development of both cognitive and psychosocial skills (Olszewski-Kubilius & Clarenbach, 2012). The districts in this study ensure that every school has a support system to facilitate the academic improvement of all students. In these districts, effective and equitable student academic supports allow students from all subpopulations and at all levels to achieve.

Student Nonacademic Supports. Recent research on social-emotional learning programs found that students involved in such programs experienced more significant improvements in their social skills, behaviors, and academic performance when compared to a similar group of peers who were not involved in such programs (Durlak, Weissburg, Dymnicki, Taylor, & Schellinger, 2011). In addition, a four-year study of five school districts implementing a character education program found that schools with more fully implemented programs experienced a greater improvement in perceived character-driven behavior and lower suspension rates than schools with less well-implemented programs (Skaggs & Bodenhorn, 2006). The four Valley districts in this study provide a number of supports to meet students' nonacademic needs to address issues that may be barriers to academic success, including mental and physical health needs. These supports include character development and civic engagement and encourage the support of whole-child development.

A closer look demonstrates how districts can defy the assumption that there must be a connection between low socioeconomic communities and the lack of school success. In the Rio Grande Valley, where the majority of people live in poverty, there are not only many Title I schools that are high achieving but also several districts with clusters of successful Title I schools. A closer look at these high-performing schools and the districts where they operate reveals structures and practices consistently implemented and maintained.

These successful districts engage in several key practices they use with students, teachers and professional staff, leaders, and the communities where they are located. The four districts discussed here successfully engaged in all 12 of the key practices and excelled at some of them. Each district has its particular means of incorporating the practices according to its available resources and context. All of the districts include the commitment of their entire professional staff and faculty to discover the most effective strategies to fit their circumstances.

Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District

Edinburg Consolidated Independent School District (CISD) is the largest of the four participating districts in both number of students served and geographic size. Edinburg CISD encompasses 945 square miles, serves more than 34,400 students, and currently offers 3 high schools, 5 middle schools, 27 elementary schools, and 1 alternative campus. Led by Superintendent René Gutiérrez, PhD, the district employs more than 4,800 staff. The district's maxim is *"The Legacy of Excellence Continues,"* and in the previous three academic years Edinburg CISD had 14 of 42 schools (approximately 33 percent) designated as High Performing or High Progress or both. In 2015–16, the district's population included 85 percent economically disadvantaged (i.e., students eligible to receive free or reduced-price lunch), 32 percent English language learners, 6 percent special education, 97 percent Hispanic, and 3 percent other ethnicities. Located in Hidalgo County, Edinburg CISD is a diverse district with urban, rural, and suburban campuses. Edinburg CISD has consistently received a TEA accountability rating of Met Standard.

In the late spring of 2017, researchers from TXCC conducted interviews and focus groups with district administrators, school administrators, and teachers. The research team determined five key practices that contribute to Edinburg's success:

‣ Curriculum

‣ Instruction

‣ Professional Development

‣ Data Use

‣ College and Career Readiness

The following sections highlight those practices, drawing on the information provided during the spring site visits.

Curriculum

Edinburg CISD has implemented and maintains a standards-based, culturally responsive curriculum. The district ensures high-quality implementation by providing a wealth of curriculum resources for teachers and providing feedback via walkthroughs.

Designing a Standards-Based Curriculum

Edinburg educators develop and revise the curriculum for the district annually to ensure that their students master the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) at all grade levels while accounting for the cultural contexts of their students. The district staff prepares for the annual curriculum writing before teachers even gather to do the work. As one administrator explained, *"We've got a curriculum and instruction committee that meets regularly…and all kinds of things get discussed and planned such as our summer curriculum writing, any type of materials that need to be purchased."* When the educators come together to develop and revise the curriculum, they keep in mind the context of their community and the lives of their students and what the data tell them about where their students have challenges

and how those factors intersect with the TEKS. This is a deep commitment, as one district leader expressed when saying, *"These are our kids. They don't have experiences. They don't have the vocabulary development. So, in our curriculum, we work towards using TEKS as a base, targeting those things we know that they need because we're in the classroom with them."* Stakeholders indicated that taking into account their student population has helped them design a curriculum that maintains high expectations while being culturally responsive.

Ensuring the Fidelity of Curriculum Implementation

Writing the curriculum is only one step for the curriculum committees at each grade level. To ensure that the curriculum will be implemented with fidelity, the committees follow through with the development of a wide variety of resources for teachers to have easily available. The quality of these resources, such as vocabulary cards, fluency cards, and resource manuals, is high, and they look like those produced by companies that publish education resources. One district administrator said, *"It's awesome, and people think we buy them from companies. We don't. They are very strategically done with specific things that…the data shows that our kids are deficient in."* In addition to designing the resources themselves, district staff members print and assemble sets of curriculum and resources for every teacher in the district. In addition to printing all resources during the summer months, the district IT department uploads them into iTunes U and makes the full set accessible through the district servers on the Internet. A district leader said, *"Our technology people are amazing. And we collaborate beautifully. We upload it all into the curriculum. So our teachers can go into our iCurriculum…. And there we have the curriculum. We have TEKS. We have the resources. You know, we have links to different places where they access different things that will enrich the curriculum. All of that is done over the summer."* And teachers appreciate the final product. As one educator said, *"You may need to spend a little more time in one area than the other [and] that basically it lends itself to that possibility. But again everything is a guide, but everything is paced out within the six weeks so it's pretty user friendly for the most part."*

In addition to the resources provided with the curriculum, Edinburg CISD has supports in place to ensure that teachers are using the resources and curriculum as intended. In particular, the district conducts walkthroughs and weekly meetings and provides one-on-one guidance. Principals are required to conduct 15 official walkthroughs with completed documentation and typically complete an additional 10 informal walkthroughs with verbal feedback for teachers. One principal explained the reason for doing both formal and informal walkthroughs: *"The teachers really want that feedback, too, they wanna know. So if we're gonna do it the right way, then it has to be fifteen. If you're just doing a little baby walkthrough, you know we can do those all day long."* Principals meet with teachers weekly, either in teams or as staff, to examine student progress and determine where changes are needed and what support may be needed so that teachers can successfully teach. A district leader described, *"If a principal feels that a particular teacher needs assistance with the presentation of the curriculum, then they make arrangements for our specialists, whether its math, history, goes and visits with the teacher and provides some guidance and some feedback along with the Dean of Instruction."* In this way, district staff work directly with campuses to support instruction and ensure the fidelity of curriculum implementation.

Soliciting Teacher Feedback

Curriculum development and revision is a year-round initiative at Edinburg CISD, with an important role taking place between implementation and preparation for the annual writing of curriculum. The district actively seeks feedback from teachers about their use of the curriculum in the classroom with their students, a crucial step for the district in discovering what works well with students and what can be improved. To obtain this feedback, the district surveys teachers about the curriculum and its implementation as well as the resources developed to accompany and support use of the curriculum. In addition, the district brings teachers together in groups to talk about the curriculum and resources as applied to specific subjects and grade levels. A district administrator described the group discussion at the end of the school year, *"We brought in the English I teachers. All the English I teachers from the four high schools. Tell us what you saw with the curriculum. What was it that the data shows?... You know, we didn't cover well enough. You know, it was poetry. We gotta go back to poetry. Or it was, you know the short answer response."*

Teachers give candid feedback that district leaders seriously consider in their effort to provide high-quality education supports. For example, teachers noted that the curriculum assumed all English teachers were using novels in their classes, but this was not the case. To address this, curriculum writers developed resources that would assist learning with any novel set or other reading source. As one administrator said, *"We developed a question stem card, so the teachers have those question stems when they're going through whether it's a novel or a literature book or the adoption, they have those question stems.… What we're doing is we're developing those rigorous questions that the kids need to hear to prepare them for the STAAR test."*

Whether by survey or through group discussion, the district wants to know what teachers think about the curriculum and support resources. One administrator summarized, *"You know, 'What did you think about this? What would you change? What does your data show your kids [did] very well on? What does your data show that your kids didn't do well on?' You know, 'How can we improve?' So there's a lot of that input from teachers across the district that comes together and then is infused into the curriculum."* Interview and focus group participants said revising the curriculum according to teachers' feedback is an important piece of Edinburg's success, as it helps the district meet the needs of students and promotes buy-in across the district's campuses.

Instruction

High-quality instruction is essential to school and district success. Edinburg CISD implements rigorous, evidence-based differentiated instruction aligned to TEKS content standards, and staff support one another to offer their students the best classroom experience possible.

Establishing Common Instructional Expectations

Educators in Edinburg were aware of the districtwide instructional expectations. Stakeholders articulated a common set of strategies for differentiating instruction, maximizing instructional time, and engaging students in learning. District leaders said establishing a common set of clear instructional expectations has been key to Edinburg's success: *"You have good solid initiatives, strategies, data-driven decisions, you*

have tools and resources to give people access to the data that they need to make decisions for student instruction and intervention, and you have all of these pieces that are concretely very important to instruction and delivery, you ideally set yourself up to have everybody doing the best practices across the entire district." For example, several educators mentioned the specific districtwide strategies for differentiated learning. One example was lessons on cognates for ELLs, helping them grasp differences and similarities of words that sound the same in English and their native language. Each district provides new knowledge and techniques for differentiated instruction by using district offices such as Special Populations and Special Education to provide the professional learning that is needed. An Edinburg CISD educator explained, *"When we build our lesson plans, we make sure that we have resources for the different learning styles [and] the different student populations, because I know that this year we're adding a different component, an additional component, which is the differentiation instruction."*

When asked about nonnegotiables for instruction, stakeholders from the central office to the classroom provided consistent responses. In addition to expressing an understanding of the value of TEKS and differentiated learning, stakeholders emphasized keeping students engaged in learning throughout the day. Maximizing instructional time was the most frequently cited "nonnegotiable" for instruction: *"Instructional focus from the word 'go,' the time on-task policies, the minute you get in the classroom to the minute you leave is time on-task with [students]."* One district staff member said, *"You want to set the tone to ensure that, 'Hey I want to maximize what I cover, from bell to bell.' And that's one thing we emphasize [with] our teachers, we have to be engaged from beginning to the end."* Instruction at Edinburg follows the 5E model: Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate/Extend, and Evaluate. At the beginning of the year, the district central office sends a laminated copy of the 5E model to every campus and tells them, *"It is required that it is posted in the classroom where we can see it when we walk in, and that the components of the 5E model are being done in the classroom and the teacher be familiar."* In addition, to equip instructors to maximize instructional time and engage students, all Edinburg staff have received training on Roberto Marzano's Nine Effective Instructional Strategies, which includes practices such as cooperative learning and setting objectives and providing feedback.

Focusing on Instructional Leadership

Instruction is one of the focus areas for Edinburg CISD's strategic plan, and the district has prioritized it accordingly. Every campus has either a fulltime curriculum assistant or a dean of instruction. In addition, stakeholders reported that the district focuses on developing school administrators as instructional leaders. As one principal told researchers, *"[District staff] put a lot of time into that, into developing the instructional familiarity with what we do."* Part of doing this takes place during the annual Leadership Academy, which school administrators—principals, assistant principals, and curriculum assistants—are required to attend at the start of every school year. During the four-day Leadership Academy, attendees are provided with professional development related to the district's instructional expectations: *"That Leadership Academy is where [district staff] set the expectation for the school year and then we go through all the trainings. If we're using a certain new system for benchmarking…if they want us to implement a certain program, we all learn it at the same time."* In addition to the Leadership Academy, the district holds monthly principals training specifically focused on instruction and the curriculum.

When it comes to instructional practices, there is no one-size-fits-all at Edinburg CISD. Instead, the district looks into evidence-based instructional resources and offers them to all schools. School leadership then has the opportunity to adopt the new materials or present a customized plan for their school. Leaders said the district acquires *"instructional materials that are identified to make a difference with practices.… Nothing is done or purchased without the[ir] involvement. If it's something that's going to affect the campus, you start with the principal. If it's going to affect first grade teachers, you bring in your first grade teachers districtwide."* District leaders described this effort to gather school input and to allow instructional needs to dictate support as a key factor in Edinburg's success. As one district staff said, *"The success [lies in] empowering of our staff, our teachers, administrators. I think that it has a big role in terms of getting the teachers to actually buy in. And if the teachers have the buy-in, then the students will be following."* By asking teachers and principals to make decisions about classroom instruction and resources, Edinburg CISD has fostered a sense of ownership and instructional leadership throughout the district.

Professional Development

The second key practice exhibited by Edinburg CISD is targeted professional learning opportunities for teachers and school administrators. The district makes use of its talented pool of educators by offering professional development workshops that are facilitated by Edinburg CISD staff. The district also participates in professional development and collaborates with other Rio Grande Valley districts through the Region 1 ESC.

Creating Targeted In-House Professional Development for Teachers

Edinburg CISD educators consistently reported having a wealth of opportunities for professional development and noted that they are given a calendar of training opportunities so they can plan their professional development in advance. One educator said that *"every Saturday, the district has some type of training going on. Then the summer is filled with training so there's always the opportunity to learn."* For the past six summers, the district has hosted the Innovate technology conference, during which Edinburg CISD teachers are paid a stipend for providing trainings to their peers. One district administrator said, *"We use our own teachers to provide the professional development.… That person is in the classroom, whereas if I went in, I haven't been in the classroom for the last 12 years. It's hard for me to tell a teacher this is what you can use in your classroom when I haven't been there for quite a bit, so it works when we bring in their master teachers."* Innovate conference presenters hold breakout sessions on a variety of topics related to using technology to enhance teaching and learning. For those sessions with high attendance, the district holds follow-up sessions during the school year because presenters are local to Edinburg. This internal pool of presenters also allows each campus to have an expert available for informal support and collaboration between district-sponsored events.

Leveraging the Resources Available through Region 1 ESC

Edinburg CISD has the added benefit of being less than two miles from the Region 1 ESC's main office, an advantage that has facilitated partnerships between the district and education service center. One district

administrator said, *"The things that [Region 1 ESC staff] have, the professional learning that they have is top notch. Not only that, most of the training is something that the state is tied to, either in an initiative form or grant form.… More than any other professional development institution, Region 1 is the one that we collaborate with the most."* Administrators from several district offices reported attending regular meetings hosted by Region 1 ESC that are tailored to administrators' role in the district. At the meetings, Edinburg CISD administrators meet with administrators from other districts in the Valley. One district leader said, *"We're always collaborating with all the districts at Region 1 and the Regional Service Center. We have one meeting a month. We bring them in for training quite a bit. They're our go-to people all the time, so we're always collaborating with them."* District administrators have the opportunity to share their successes and learn new strategies from others.

Data Use

The third key practice exhibited by Edinburg CISD is using data consistently at all levels to monitor student, campus, and district progress. Edinburg CISD has effective systems and processes in place to help administrators and teachers analyze and use data for decision making, and data are used strategically to support underperforming campuses.

Utilizing Data Management Systems

At Edinburg CISD, sharing data at all levels is considered a high priority from district administrators. As one interviewee told us during site visits: *"Not only do we share the information and the data with our principals, but we share them with our teachers…[and] teachers are sharing the information with the students. This is what we need to do, and this is where we need to be."* To facilitate data sharing with all stakeholders, interview and focus group participants described three data management systems used within the district: Eduphoria, DMAC Solutions (Data Management for Assessment and Curriculum), and lead4ward. Each system serves its own purpose, but they all work in tandem with one another.

Eduphoria is a data management platform that houses state and benchmark assessment data and aligns them with the TEKS, allowing users to clearly see where students are excelling and where additional support is needed. One district administrator explained how Eduphoria is typically used in the district, saying the platform *"gives us the breakdown of the skills that we need to isolate. Then we group our students also by skill."* Stakeholders were particularly enthusiastic about Eduphoria's usability, with one district leader saying that teachers, principals, and district staff *"can filter, identify specifically what teachers had success with which that sees, all of our online testing, benchmarking, is on there through that portal. It's made our users very independent, and it's made our data very accessible."* In addition, interview and focus group participants praised the timeliness of the data reporting, emphasizing the immediacy of benchmark assessments results: *"[Teachers] get their data right away, so they can provide feedback for the students."* Stakeholders said that Eduphoria allows users to *"drill into the data deeply"* to make classroom, school, and district-level decisions.

In addition to Eduphoria, Edinburg CISD also uses DMAC Solutions for reporting. DMAC is a platform that generates, administers, and reports on TEKS-based assessments. Edinburg educators described the platform as *"a little more canned"* than Eduphoria, which stakeholders sometimes prefer for their reporting. As one district administrator said, *"From the experience I've had with working with principals and educators, the reports that are in DMAC are very aligned to the way that they would like to see certain data presented."* Participating teachers validated this statement, saying DMAC provides them with clear, easy-to-produce reports related to their students.

Finally, the district uses lead4ward, an internet-based platform that educators use as a resource to support data analysis and evidence-based decision making. One district administrator described lead4ward as a *"data disaggregation training, developmental service that the district has contracted to help make our instructional leaders more savvy and data driven with their decision making process."* An administrator said lead4ward provides the district *"with the resource materials.… You could buy field guides. You could buy charts. They give you snapshots."* The service also has products that are tied in with Eduphoria, including *"electronically generated heat maps. So you can plug all your STAAR [State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness] data into a heat map, and it'll tell you where the kids are having problems, what reporting categories they're struggling with, what student expectations they're struggling with, [and] what courses they're struggling."* The lead4ward platform, like Eduphoria and DMAC, provides the district with a unique service that assists with data analysis.

Using a Variety of Data to Support Underperforming Campuses

While stakeholders at Edinburg CISD agreed that data are used for "everything" throughout the district, interview and focus group participants said the most important task for data analysis is determining and providing support to underperforming campuses. Part of the job description for the district's director of assessment is providing district leaders with long-range reports on struggling campuses to help them develop improvement plans. As one district leader reported, *"We get the information in different formats. We have ranking from campuses. We have history of where that campus was the year before."* With this data, school administrators are expected to create *"a campus plan that reflects either their successes or their failures."* In addition to principal accountability, these reports are also used for districtwide planning and accountability. *"Even though all our schools have Met Standard,"* one district leader said, *"we still have some at the bottom.… The focus is on them all the time. We use the data quite well, and ask the superintendent to set his goals about, what are you going to do about this particular campus? What are you going to do different next year that didn't happen this year?"* Once leadership makes data-driven decisions about where additional support is needed, district administrators step in to provide it.

Over the summer, the district holds a Principals' Academy, during which all principals *"study their data"* and assemble a team from their campus. This campus team then meets with the superintendent, the assistant superintendent for curriculum and instruction, and all other relevant district staff and together they create a *"game plan for our course. This is where we are with the sub-groups, by grade levels, by subject area, and this is where we're headed, and this is how we're going to do it."* This plan is prepared by the campus-level team and reviewed by the district-level team. During review, the district team looks for places where they can offer additional support. Stakeholders emphasized that the purpose of these meetings is *"not to be*

critical of the principal, but to say, 'Okay. This is how we're going to help.'" All of this takes place before the school year begins. After the administration of any district-level assessment, the same team meets again to discuss the data and monitor the school's progress. One district administrator said that these data meetings are *"very effective because we look at the item analysis and then we also look at the teacher performance on there. And we zero in, even to the question that was missed the most.… We monitor from benchmark one to benchmark two…and we look at the individual student progress."* By convening a team of district- and school-level stakeholders to monitor data at all levels, Edinburg CISD has created a culture of data-driven decision making that addresses the needs of individual students throughout the district.

College and Career Readiness

College and career readiness begins early at Edinburg CISD with both the primary and secondary school initiatives fully engaged to prepare students and their families for college. Edinburg CISD offers dual enrollment courses and career and technical education (CTE) through established partnerships within the community, introduces students to postsecondary pathways, and helps students earn credits and industry certifications while still in high school.

Offering College-Ready Courses and Promoting College as a Goal

Edinburg CISD uses the advantage of its size, 34,000 students, to offer courses that meet all of the college and career interests of their students, and they begin the process of encouraging students to plan for college at an early age. One district leader described why their college preparation process begins at the elementary level saying, *"You drive around many of our elementary schools they now talk about, 'So-and-so is college bound,' 'We have college scholars and we have the young college next to this and that.' There is a culture of college that's being implemented and nurtured from early years."* The "culture of college" pervades the entire district and is evident in every school.

The number of teachers needed to teach their students means the district can sustain teachers with a breadth of expertise, thus allowing them to offer a wide variety of classes to meet every interest. A district administrator said, *"We offer everything from computer technology to dual enrollment to AP to MIT to Harvard to…whatever it is that the student wants, at each of the high schools."* The same administrator also explained, *"We are not a small school district where only five or ten students are taking calculus, AB, or BC.… We don't have those situations. We're blessed in that we have the number of students wanting to take those courses, and we have to offer every single course that the student wants to take."*

Parents and families are also part of the equation in that most of the parents do not have college experience themselves that would help them guide their children. The district's knowledge of the culture and families of their students allows them to offer what the families need to know. An educator at Edinburg CISD described their strategy of engaging parents in college readiness efforts saying, *"We use our college and career readiness supervisor to do trainings as well. Not just for students, but we have different trainings throughout the year for parents so that they understand, what are credits in high school, what they need to graduate, and then what are they going to need to get into a university or a college."* Thus, families are fully included in the process and can add meaningful support to their teenagers' college-bound direction.

Preparing Students for a Variety of Careers

Edinburg CISD recognizes that there are many postsecondary paths and facilitates learning of knowledge and skills that prepare students for both college and career. As one district administrator said, *"For after graduation, whether they decide to go the technical route, whether they decide to get a job, whether they decide to join the military, whether they want to go to a four-year college, whether they want to go to MIT and Harvard.… We prepare students for whatever it is that he or she wants."* As part of their career readiness initiative, the district has partnered with local businesses to offer internships that give students relevant work experience. One interviewee described one partnership, saying that they *"offer these students a short program such as a six weeks welding program where the kids have to commit to going to such places, mechanical institutes and going through courses to get their welding certification and training for it."* Edinburg CISD also offers CTE courses, such as technology, nursing, pharmacy, and cosmetology. Through these relevant work experiences and CTE coursework, students graduate with training and certifications that will make them strong job candidates.

Recovering Dropouts and Elevating Graduation Rates

A common trait across the Rio Grande Valley is that all children and youth are part of the community, and in the school districts this belief extends to all educators thinking about each student as always their student. Whether the student is in their classroom now or was in their classroom five years ago, each student is still theirs. At the district level, this thinking spurs a deep commitment to every student earning a high school diploma and taking steps to start college or career. They do not give up on any student, not even those who drop out of school. The district response has been two programs: Vision Academy and Project Gateway.

Vision Academy is a project spearheaded by the superintendent that assists former dropouts in returning to school to complete requirements for graduation and take significant steps toward their chosen careers, including college as part of the professional development process. They refer to the mission as recovering students. One district leader said, *"They have come back and not only have they earned their high school diploma, a lot of them have gained certificates, enrollment, and also have done dual enrollment and had picked up some college hours from STC [South Texas College]. We're very proud of that project."* The district is looking forward to reaching 1,000 graduates in Vision Academy. As a district leader said, *"We just had the graduation last week. We had up to this point graduated 986 students."*

Project Gateway contributes to the overall mission of gathering mobility and dropout data on every student who does not show up when school starts each year. Throughout the district, each campus has a parental aide who participates in Project Gateway. One interview participant for this study explained, *"Every August, every campus prepares a list of students that have not returned to school after the first week of instruction. All the parental involvement aides are pulled to a centralized place, given a list of those students to make a one-to-one contact with the home."* From the information gained by those contacts, the schools and district can plan next steps where students are in need.

Summary

Edinburg CISD demonstrates a strong commitment to continuously improving its district processes in a way that will best serve its students. The curriculum that the district creates is formed around the TEKS but considers students' cultural context and experiences. Edinburg CISD also implements rigorous, evidence-based differentiated instruction to facilitate learning of the TEKS. The district provides guidance for curriculum and instruction by developing a variety of curriculum resources and conducting regular walkthroughs. For professional development, Edinburg CISD takes advantage of the variety of trainings and services offered through Region 1 and also develops internal trainings based on the expertise of Edinburg staff. As part of monitoring student, campus, and district progress, Edinburg CISD establishes systems and processes that help administrators and teachers use data for decision making and school improvement. Finally, the district creates opportunities for students to succeed in their postsecondary plans by implementing college and career readiness initiatives such as dual enrollment and CTE courses. All of these practices contribute to the excellence and continued success of Edinburg CISD.

Los Fresnos Consolidated Independent School District

Located in the city of Los Fresnos, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, Los Fresnos Consolidated Independent School District (CISD) serves almost 11,000 students across nearly 500 square miles (Los Fresnos Consolidated Independent School District, n.d.). Los Fresnos CISD has one high school that serves grades 11–12, one high school that serves grades 9–10, three middle schools, nine elementary schools, and three alternative campuses. Led by Superintendent Gonzalo Salazar, the district's mission is to *"provide a quality educational experience that results in the development of socially responsible life-long learners."* This quality educational experience has led to Los Fresnos CISD having nine schools designated as High Performing or High Progress over the previous three years. The success has indeed been noticed by the community. As one district leader said, *"I can't go anywhere in this community without somebody saying 'How are you doing? How are things going? Did we have another successful year? Are the scores in yet?... I do believe that the high expectations emanate from the community. They value education."* The district serves a diverse group of students. In the 2015–16 school year, 78 percent of students were classified as economically disadvantaged, 23 percent were identified as English language learners (ELL), and 8 percent were identified for special education services. Students are 97 percent Hispanic and 3 percent White (Texas Education Agency, 2016). Despite having 14 Title I schools, the district has high expectations for its students, as one educator explained: *"[Students] do well, even though they don't have much money, because we have teachers that work with them. The teachers and the parents work, and one of the things that they want to do well is in the school…. We can say well, everything being equal, I think our kids are going to be able to compete."* Los Fresnos CISD is certainly able to compete. The district received a TEA accountability rating of Met Standard in 2014, 2015, and 2016.

In the late spring of 2017, TXCC researchers spent a total of five days at Los Fresnos CISD, conducting interviews and focus groups with district administrators, school administrators, and teachers. Interview

and focus-group responses were analyzed, and the research team determined four key practices that contribute to Los Fresnos' success:

- Organizational Coherence
- Student Academic Supports
- Student Nonacademic Supports
- College and Career Readiness

The following sections highlight those practices, drawing on the information provided during the spring site visits.

Organizational Coherence

The first key practice exhibited by Los Fresnos CISD was organizational coherence throughout the district. The district shares common goals at the district and school levels and creates vertical and horizontal consistency between schools.

Aligning School and District Improvement Plans

Los Fresnos CISD promotes consistency districtwide by having school administrators be a part of creating the district improvement plan. The district convenes a District Effectiveness and Improvement Committee (DEIC) that evaluates and revises the plan every year. The committee includes a variety of stakeholders: district administrators, school administrators, parents, and community members. With school administrator feedback embedded, the district improvement plan is then sent to school administrators to modify for their campus. One district leader said, *"What they have is not something that I dictated should be our district improvement plan. It's what collectively other stakeholders came up with for the district, and why wouldn't you aspire to lead your campus in the same direction."* Several school administrators reported using the district improvement plan as a framework for their school improvement plans. One educator said, *"We go to the DEIC meetings, and then that's trickled down to the campus improvement plan. It's all one big improvement plan, I guess, and focus area."* The educator added that the meetings are *"well aligned. Every campus will have a little offshoot need here and there for their particular campus and demographics, but I think we always start with the district improvement plan and work our way through ours using it."* Los Fresnos CISD recognizes individual school needs. School administrators have the autonomy to take the district improvement plan template and make revisions or additions for their school.

Establishing Consistency Across Campuses

In addition to aligning district and school improvement plans at the start of the year, Los Fresnos CISD continually brings together school administrators to collaborate on common goals. The district establishes horizontal consistency by convening separate meetings for elementary and middle school principals. During the regular meetings, district leadership shares information about districtwide initiatives. The meetings also serve as a means of facilitating collaboration between school administrators. One district leader said, *"We spend time in our principals meetings sharing, and I'll say 'Tell me a success story. Tell me*

some of the things you're struggling with.' There will be a quiet period, then someone will say 'Well, I've had this situation happen.' Then they begin to share and the exchange of ideas begins at the principals meeting."

Los Fresnos CISD also promotes vertical consistency between elementary and secondary grades through careful organization at the district level. In the past, the Office of Academics was led by separate executive directors for elementary and secondary education. Realizing there was limited communication between the two positions, the district restructured the office so that there was instead an executive director for math and social studies education and an executive director for English and science education. That way, there was consistency between elementary and secondary education for each content area. Furthermore, the district relies on curriculum strategists to share curriculum and instruction practices and monitor implementation at the schools. Through vertical alignment meetings, educators discuss curriculum and instruction in elementary and secondary grades. One district leader said, "*Teachers at the high school are looking at how this was taught in 8th grade, 7th grade, 6th grade, 5th grade. They go all the way down in their PLCs. We really are very intentional with what we're doing and how we're teaching.*" This careful review ensures consistent instruction between grade levels and a smooth transition for students.

Student Academic Supports

The second key practice exhibited by Los Fresnos CISD was a support system that facilitates the academic improvement of all students. The district promotes collaboration between school staff to identify student needs and assign differentiated interventions.

Supporting Academically Struggling Students

At Los Fresnos CISD, academically struggling students are identified through Response to Intervention (RTI) committees. RTI committee members consider data reports and assign interventions like pull outs, Saturday tutoring academies, and summer school. One educator described a "Power Hour" during their school day when teachers collaborate to reteach concepts to small groups or individual students. This year, Los Fresnos CISD also decided to pilot a more interactive version of its Saturday academies and is considering similar programming in the future. One district leader described the session saying, "*We got seven of our rock star teachers…and we had each of them set up a station for Saturday morning, and they each did STAAR-based-type prepping them for the test, and we had the kids rotate. Go to one teacher, and they had kind of a fun hands-on activity, but still kind of hitting a critical point that's going to reach far.*" Los Fresnos educators emphasized differentiated and engaging interventions to meet the needs of all of their struggling students.

Similar to students facing general academic struggles, Los Fresnos CISD addresses the needs of students with disabilities by convening an RTI committee that consists of school administrators, teachers, nurses, and other key personnel. This process is in place at campuses districtwide. One district leader said, "*If we see that this is something that we can intervene at the campus level, and we can try and figure out how to best serve the student there at the campus, then there's a process in place where the administrator, teachers, whoever needs to be involved, come together to formulate a plan with the student.*" Los Fresnos CISD has a continuum of services for students with disabilities: self-contained units, paraprofessionals,

and inclusion. By providing these services, the district hopes to effectively teach according to the TEKS. One Los Fresnos educator said, "*Dealing with disabilities, you work with many with prerequisite skills, so that's where the vertical alignment plays a major role. If you have a student that is needing to know inferencing in fifth grade but not familiar with comparing, contrasting, or characters, we will start there and work our way up*."

Supporting English Language Learners

In the 2015–16 school year, 23 percent of Los Fresnos CISD students were identified as ELLs. To address the needs of ELL students, many Los Fresnos CISD educators are bilingual and have received training on the English for Speakers of Other Languages (ESOL) protocol. There are Language Development Labs at the elementary level and ESOL classes at the middle and high schools. At the district, there is an ELL strategist. One Los Fresnos educator said, "*Just like we have the content [strategist], she helps our teachers in giving them the resources and the skills that they need to help these students. I think that's a great support*." Los Fresnos CISD educators also cited Language Learners at the University of Texas at Austin's Center for Hispanic Achievement (LUCHA™) course credit transcript analysis as a helpful tool for high school ELLs. Through this program, students receive credit for coursework completed in Mexico if it aligns to TEA standards. LUCHA facilitates timely graduation for students and informs administrators of potential student needs.

Student Nonacademic Supports

The third key practice exhibited by Los Fresnos CISD was a support system that addresses students' nonacademic needs. The district collaborates with community organizations to ensure that students are mentally and physically healthy. In turn, the district promotes civic engagement and provides opportunities for students to give back to the community that supports them.

Supporting the Whole Student

Along with academic needs, Los Fresnos CISD works to support the whole student by addressing students' more basic needs. The district partners with Communities in Schools (CIS) to support students and their families. CIS is a dropout prevention program that identifies the unique challenges students face and brings together community resources to alleviate those issues. At the time of the site visit, Los Fresnos district administrators were planning to expand CIS districtwide. With CIS, district leaders collaborate with school staff to develop a CIS plan for each month. One district leader described the importance of CIS, saying, "*The main reason why we have CIS is to try and prevent [dropout]. Why are we reacting when we can prevent?*" CIS participants are identified in a data-driven manner. One district leader described the process: "*What we do [at the school] is we identify the 60 neediest kids and I don't mean social. We use the criteria of testing, if they failed a test, if they failed a grade, if they are constantly absent, if there's a behavior, there's a social need, that's the criteria we use*." Once identified, CIS participants receive services that include, but are not limited to, individual counseling, group counseling, clothing donation, food donation, and transportation.

Instilling a Sense of Civic Engagement

In addition to providing academic enrichment, Los Fresnos CISD strives to develop the character of their students. Throughout the site visit, we consistently heard examples of how the community has supported the district. By providing opportunities for civic engagement, the district encourages students to give back in the same way. One educator said the district has something called the "Middle School Experience" where they bring in "*a dynamic speaker to address…character development, community service, and kind of a dynamic space. Then we encourage the teachers to go back into the classrooms and reiterate that and try to push the importance of giving back to the community*." Volunteering is a part of many extracurricular organizations at Los Fresnos. Students engage in community service through athletics, Reserve Officers' Training Corps (ROTC), Future Farmers of America, and National Honor Society. Describing extracurricular activities, one educator added, "*We have a club at the high school and it's called Ojo a Ojo [Eye to Eye]. It is completely that. It is a peer tutorial group, and they tutor within the high school, and they also go down to the middle schools to tutor.*" The high school CTE program also offers a "Ready, Set, Teach" class during which high school students are bused to the elementary schools to provide instructional support in the classroom. In addition to donating their time, students donate resources. One educator said, "*[Students] are always involved in trying to help each other. And I think it is something the district models for them so the kids want to reciprocate as well.*" Schools hold donation drives to collect clothing, school supplies, and toys for students in need.

College and Career Readiness

The fourth key practice exhibited by Los Fresnos CISD was the use of strategies focused on students' college and career readiness. District administrators collaborate on dropout prevention efforts and offer alternative schooling options to keep students in school. Los Fresnos CISD also communicates high expectations for students' postsecondary plans and offers dual enrollment and CTE coursework to ensure a bright future.

Decreasing Dropout Rates

Although the district works hard to address nonacademic needs that may lead to dropout, there are cases where these proactive measures may not be enough. Los Fresnos CISD has implemented procedures to identify dropouts and complete their education on a schedule that fits their needs. First, the district has made great progress in recovering their dropouts by creating a "*dropout task force*" committee that consists of the superintendent, district leaders, and school administrators. The committee runs data reports and creates individual profiles of students in need of recovery. For example, during weekly meetings that ran from August through the school-start window, committee members took a list of more than 100 students and spent time focusing on each individual student. One district leader said, "*We each took turns. 'Here is a student that didn't come back and has 16 credits, but it looks like he has attendance issues and some discipline issues.'…'Oh, I know him, he was at my elementary school and he's now in high school. I have a relationship with that family. I'll take that folder.'… We would go out and find them, based on the relationships that someone had with the kids.*" Once dropout students are identified, the district's next step is to work with the student to find a way to complete their education. As one option, the district offers

a flexible school day through the College, Career, and Technology Academy (CCTA). CCTA has in-person and online classes, which is especially helpful for students who dropped out of traditional schooling due to family and work commitments.

Preparing Students for College

At Los Fresnos CISD, high expectations for postsecondary education are communicated from elementary to high school. At elementary and middle schools, college readiness strategies include displaying college banners, having college T-shirt days, and holding trivia contests about universities. The district also recently hired three staff focused on college readiness and added a GO Center at the high school that offers help with the college admissions process. The high expectations shared by Los Fresnos CISD staff convey that students can go to college despite the economic disadvantages that they face. Speaking about standardized test preparation, one district leader said, *"We're doing a big push with Khan Academy.… It's great, because it levels the playing field because it's free. That's how we can compete with [other districts] where those kids can afford $1,000 courses."* The district also sees assistance with the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) as a means of giving their students the same opportunities as others. Through mechanisms like the GO Center and information sessions for parents, the district has doubled the number of students applying for FAFSA.

Furthermore, Los Fresnos students make valuable use of the school day to prepare for postsecondary education. For example, one district leader said, *"We have actually redesigned our English IV classes where we're putting an essay component within it to help kids within that class write their college essays.… They're going to have it all, so when they do go to the GO center, 'You have your essay?' 'I did my essay in class, here you go.'"* Students also have the opportunity to get a head start on their postsecondary education by taking Advanced Placement and dual enrollment courses. Some of the free dual enrollment courses include English, math, history, chemistry, Spanish, and art. Los Fresnos CISD educators reported that some of their former students have benefited from this offering and have graduated from high school with an Associate's Degree.

Preparing Students for Careers

Along with preparing students for postsecondary education, Los Fresnos CISD teaches technical skills to ensure success for those students who do not immediately enroll in college. The district offers CTE endorsements in STEM, public services, business and industry, and arts and humanities with several pathways within each endorsement. When deciding what pathways to offer, the district considers the local labor market to "*make sure that we are turning out kids that have the skills that they need. We're seeing it in our community colleges. We're constantly in communication as far as what programs they are opening or canceling, because they are looking at what is the job market in the area.*" One district leader estimated that over 80 percent of students enroll in at least one CTE course.

In shaping their CTE program, the district convenes a CTE advisory committee composed of district and school administrators as well as business partners who provide advice on how Los Fresnos CISD can build up their programs. One district leader described an example of the support they receive from their advisory

committee: "*We have anesthesiologists and doctors that help us with our medical academy. They visit with teachers.… They visit the schools. They speak to the kids, and they review the curriculum with our teachers and then make recommendations to what we should do to improve*." Through the advisory committee, local businesses have partnered with the district to provide internship opportunities to students. One community partner said, "*They came in and said, 'We have this proposition for you. We have this program we're looking to start.'… They have a hospitality program where they're going to the hotels and restaurants and they're teaching the students about how to work in the hospitality industry*." Stakeholders reported the district is interested in supporting the many career interests of all their students: "*We want to do something for our business students, our technology students, [and] our engineering students*." Internships have given students real-world experiences in areas related to hospitality, finance, chemistry, engineering, and graphic design.

Summary

Los Fresnos CISD creates a high-quality education experience by communicating its high expectations for students and implementing districtwide strategies that contribute to their success. The district starts by aligning district and school improvement plans so that every campus in the district is working toward the same goals. Los Fresnos achieves organizational coherence by implementing and monitoring curriculum and instruction at elementary and secondary grade levels to ensure consistency in content and sequence. The district addresses the academic needs of students by offering a variety of tutorials as well as supporting the unique needs of ELLs and students with disabilities. Los Fresnos CISD also partners with community organizations to meet the most basic needs of economically disadvantaged students. Finally, the district prepares students for the future by offering college-level courses and a number of CTE and internship experiences.

The hard work, and resulting success, of Los Fresnos CISD has in turn had a positive impact on the community. The area served by the district has seen a surge of families moving for the opportunity to enroll their children in Los Fresnos schools. One educator said, "*Basically you can sell homes here by opening a subdivision and saying you're zoned to Los Fresnos. That's it. People try to move into this district because of the school system*." The community also has the added benefit of retaining a high percentage of the "socially responsible life-long learners" mentioned in the district's mission statement. One district leader said, "*I know that when I go to a hospital and I see a former student of mine as the nurse, the doctor, or the assistant, I know that I'm going to be fine. The quality of kid that comes from Los Fresnos… I'll put them against anybody in the world. They're respectful and they're full of dreams*." With dedicated staff, and a supportive community behind them, Los Fresnos CISD models key district practices and consistently shows a commitment to their students' life-long success.

Roma Independent School District

Roma ISD is the most rural of the four participating districts and located farther west. The district offices are less than a mile from the picturesque Rio Grande that separates the U.S. from Mexico and reflect the degree to which the cultures and communities interact across that border. The fluid nature of the international border combines with the rural setting of the district to form a context that is both complex and well established in terms of cultural practices. As described by district leadership, "*I know for some*

schools in the Valley, it's a hop, a skip, and a jump, but we're talking 45 minutes to the nearest Mission school (the next large district on the eastern edge of the district) and 90 miles to the nearest Laredo schools (the next district on the western edge). We are centrally located, but we're centrally located in the middle of nowhere." Comments such as these were made with a touch of humor as educators and district leaders described, with affection, the reality of their environment at the same time that they demonstrated an unwavering focus on the best intentions for the children and youth of their community.

The Roma ISD community and its schools are located in Starr County and the district serves just over 6,400 students. Roma ISD currently includes one high school, two middle schools, six elementary schools, and one alternative learning center (Roma Independent School District, viewed December 15, 2017). Led by Superintendent Carlos Guzman, the district employs more than 1,000 staff. The district's vision statement is "*Roma ISD, a dynamic community committed to the achievement of student excellence.*" In the previous three academic years, three of Roma's nine schools were designated as High Performing or High Progress. In 2015–16, the district's population included 88 percent economically disadvantaged, 67 percent ELLs, 5 percent special education, and 100 percent Hispanic (Texas Education Agency, 2016). Roma ISD has consistently received a TEA accountability rating of Met Standard.

In addition to these strengths, Roma ISD has established additional practices that are typical of rural districts where professional staff make adaptations that differ from larger districts in more populous areas. Roma district staff members fill multiple roles in order to maintain all needed functions. For instance, the deputy superintendent also has the human resources director title and is in charge of the Technology Department. This typical rural practice fosters a sense of team play and strong community. As one district leader said, "*You have to have many different hats, know many different things. And I think that's one reason we are successful, because everyone is cross-trained.*" The practice of multiple roles per person has a positive side effect in that staff members have extensive knowledge across departments and areas of expertise that then encourage interconnections across all areas of the district and schools. Everything is connected to everything else between schools, within the district, and within the community. These interconnections are strengthened by the fact that everyone knows everyone in the community. The superintendent explained that, "*Another thing is everybody knows everybody. So the conversation, and it doesn't matter where you are, you are always talking about school.*"

TXCC researchers interviewed district leaders and key staff members late in spring 2017, and conducted focus groups with teachers and principals. As with all of the districts in this study, the research team learned that Roma ISD has strong examples of practices that reflect each of the 12 key practices. At the same time, they excel at four key practices:

▸ Organizational Coherence

▸ Leadership

▸ Use of Data

▸ Nonacademic Supports for Students

Organizational Coherence

In operating the Roma district, other key practices become foundational to the organizational coherence that runs through the district. Extensive communication, collaboration, and strategic planning provide the structures used to establish and maintain organizational coherence. This is further strengthened by the rural setting where everyone has to play multiple roles to keep the district running. The result is that teachers and principals know what is happening throughout their schools and at all other schools in the district. And they keep in mind how their decisions help their students. As one principal said, "*College is not a dream. It's a plan*."

Supporting Students with Horizontal Coherence

Much of the mobility in the district is within the district and is caused by issues such as families outgrowing their apartments and needing to move to a larger apartment or families moving in with other relatives due to job loss or similar financial crises. Horizontal coherence is important for these students to be able to easily meet the academic expectations at their new schools. Whether the reasons for families to move is happy or disappointing, the students will find their new Roma school welcoming and engaged in the same academic work as the school they had to leave. Roma educators are clear about the purpose of organizational coherence as shown by their common expectation of what students will learn while allowing each teacher to determine how to lead students to that learning. As one principal described, "*We have common assessments at the end of every six weeks where all the elementaries do the same exams, but how you get there during six weeks, it's your flexibility*."

Confirming that Vertical Coherence Is Effective with Formal and Informal Evaluation

Vertical coherence allows all Roma students to benefit as teachers and principals across the district work together to ensure a seamless movement to new knowledge with a strong foundation from pre-k through high school graduation. Both formal and informal practices support this. One administrator explained, "*All the elementaries do their curriculum together during the summer so they are all following the same timeline, like benchmark assessments. The middle schools also have their curriculum during the summer and is together*." Teachers informally check on this coherence by regularly asking teachers in higher grades how former students are doing, for example, when teachers see one another at events and gatherings in the district and outside of school. In addition, high school teachers ask middle school teachers about the incoming freshman class. One administrator described the intergrade level communication as pivoting around middle school: "*Elementary communicate[s] with middle school to talk about incoming sixth graders. That's when there is the most communication. With middle schools, it's right now they ask about freshman and grade changes and freshman orientation. That's when there's more communication*." As one Roma principal said, "*I like to ask how my sixth graders are doing in math. How are they doing in English? I want to know if I'm meeting [standards]. And if not, what can I do? Like where are they missing out or what skills are they having problems with so I can bring it down to the elementary. It's usually done informally, to be honest. We do formal with the principal meetings because you see the data. I like to touch informally.*"

Reinforcing Organizational Coherence with a Strategic Plan

The strategic plan is at the center of the connections that drive Roma ISD, and everyone participates in the development and refinement of the plan. As one administrator explained, the process that district leaders use with administrators in developing the plan is repeated again at the campus level: "*Before we turn [the strategic plan] in we do the same with our teachers, department, grade level, and [special] populations. We grab all sections and everybody gets a section and meets in committees.*" This practice ensures that everyone in the district remains aware of how their work interplays with other facets of work in the district. Administrators were explicit in discussing the connections within the district and the strategic plan, particularly with regard to meeting the needs of subpopulations such as gifted and talented, limited English proficiency, migrants, and special education students. As one administrator said, "*One of our biggest things is that it focuses on our students overall. Of course it has to start as an individual and then we build up.*" By including stakeholders at all levels and focusing on the development of all students, Roma has created a strategic plan that promotes organizational coherence across the district.

Leadership

In Roma, district leaders are longtime members of the community who have worked their way through the ranks and earned the trust of their colleagues along the way. They know one another well and have developed effective practices for coordinating their responsibilities.

Developing Local Leadership and Balance with Open Discourse

The overwhelming majority of leaders in Roma ISD are people who grew up in Roma. The few exceptions tend to be people married to Roma locals. The practice of developing Roma community members as leaders begins with teachers who are from the community who begin to move up the ranks in the district so that they learn the teacher leadership roles and school administrator and program leadership roles before moving into district-level positions. Because the staff is made up of professionals, they are able to use the fact that they have known one another for decades to an advantage when developing their interactions in the work environment. Leaders talked about the "intimate" and "family" type environment of the district, which comes from knowing one another well for a long period of time. The effectiveness of these longtime relationships is supported by staff's common practice of speaking their minds, even when they disagree with one another. As one district leader talked about the superintendent, he said, "*I've known him since the 60s. When I came back into the district 18 years ago, I came into Mr. Guzman's campus. He provided excellent leadership there, and I owe him a great deal because he gave me a second chance to come back into the district.*"

Utilizing a Superintendent Style that Invites Contact Across the District

District leaders were clear about the effectiveness of this superintendent's leadership style, describing Mr. Guzman as relaxed and easy to approach. One stakeholder said that *Superintendent Guzman has "more of an intimate [style]. I see that it's more laid back.*" One district leader described what happened when he

brought forward an idea for a new program soon after the current superintendent had taken office. "*So when I ran this idea by him his first year, which was three years ago, for summer, he said 'yes.' So he said 'just take care of it. Run with it. You're in charge. Do what you need to do.' So we've been doing it since then*."

Facilitating Open Communication

Leaders in this district operate in a culture of trust that encourages individuals to take the initiative and allows them to disagree with one another. This practice starts with the superintendent, who was repeatedly described as relaxed or laid back with regard to his leadership style. Another district leader said, "*He meets with you and he trusts you. He trusts that you're doing the right thing. He feels that if there are concerns, he can call you in, and he'll discuss it if he has concerns*." That trust extends throughout the district and across its leaders, as described by another district leader, "*We all have a high level of trust with each other. We do have some very intense conversations which we've come to call 'The Realities.' So we have, I guess, a very open relationships with our supervisors*." This openness gives administrators permission to disagree and fosters trust across departments.

Data Use

Educators in Roma have years of experience developing skills for making data-driven decisions. As one district leader said, "*For years, from previous administrations we were guided into making sure our decisions were data driven. So it's something that was instilled from previous administrations and continues to this day.*" Data-driven decision making is deeply ingrained in the district's professional culture, so that staff members at all levels are comfortable using data to develop an accurate picture of a situation, determine whether there is an issue, and discover the root causes of issues. That knowledge then guides their planning programs, direction of staff, and instruction.

Using Data Immediately and Frequently

As soon as test scores are made available, the Roma central office sends the scores to the schools. The delivery of the data is not simply to one person at each school, but to at least three people, including the principal, the assistant principal, and the facilitator of the test. The schools, in turn, respond quickly by forming groups that take a deeper dive into the data and plan for the support students may need to raise their scores on the next test.

Because data use is an automatic part of district operations, all staff become comfortable turning to data in their meetings and individual work. For instance, one principal said, "*We all have the weekly benchmarks. We go over the weeklies during PLCs, during our professional learning communities meetings. And those always start with data. Always. And every teacher is looking at everybody's results. So that brings the ownership and the thought that 'I have to do better. Everybody is looking at my grades*.'"

Data all the Time

I run all the weekly tests. And I check to see how the children are doing at my campus weekly. I know which children are struggling, and I make sure they have an RTI going. I know the children who are doing good, and I want for them to do great. And I know the ones that are doing great, and I want them to do even better. I monitor. I track every single child. So by the time they're going to the next grade level, I know who my strugglers are. And I need to make sure they get tutorials or enrichment during the year to make sure to close any gaps that they may have for the next grade level. We use data weekly, daily if you want to say it that way."

Administrator, Roma ISD

Modeling Commitment to Data Use by Each School Administrator

For the practice of data use to pervade each school, the principal must be thought of by staff as someone who relies on good data to drive decisions. Principals ensure that teachers have access to all the data possible and ask about data when discussing changes. They also demonstrate the application of data in their own decisions and daily practice. One teacher offered an example: "*Our principal keeps track of each and every student in every class, how they are doing on their weekly exams. Analyzes that to see where our kids are, to track their progress. So like we need to start doing RTI. So we use our data a lot*."

Using a Variety of Data to Understand Student Needs

Roma uses data in all facets of academic life, but particularly in those areas where staff can be proactive to avoid or minimize problems before they arise. One example is the use of data to keep the number of students who are chronically absent as low as possible. A district leader said, "*Our goal this year is to provide data every two weeks. Like how many kids are already on that 10 percent absent. Let's say they've been in school for ten days, who has been absent one day?*" This person then elaborated about their search for patterns in the data regarding other categories, such as "*the number of kids that are migrant and of those kids, how many have been retained and what is the absent percentages of those kids? They are data hungry*."

In addition to looking beyond test scores, educators in Roma examine data from every year the students are in their districts to find the beginning of any issue that arises. For instance, educators identify the high school dropouts each year, then dig into their years of data for each student to discover patterns, such as 90 percent of high school dropouts failed fifth-grade math. One teacher explained, "*A pre-algebra thing is going on there*." The district allowed schools to develop their own strategies for addressing issues related

to fifth-grade math. Some schools looked at certifications for their teachers, while others provided additional supports for teachers. Both strategies were successful as student scores increased for that cohort when students were tested in eighth grade.

Nonacademic Supports for Students

With the vast majority of students living near or below the poverty level, it would be easy to become overwhelmed, but district leaders and staff, as well as school-level administrators and teachers, have realistic expectations of themselves and the schools in the Roma community. They understand what is within the district's authority, and they respond accordingly. They are creative and open minded in identifying appropriate steps and programs. This is one of the advantages of having professionals who are products of the same community where they serve.

Thinking Creatively to Meet Basic Needs in Student Homes

Every community with high percentages of poverty confronts the issue of families that depend on the ability of school breakfast/lunch programs to adjust their budgets to feed students during the summer months when school is not in session. While Roma ISD is not wealthy, the district is willing to use any resource it can afford to help students and the community. One example took place soon after Superintendent Guzman stepped into his leadership role in Roma. The transportation director approached him to suggest that they make the school buses that sit idle during the summer months available to deliver food to the students in their homes. Three years later, the district still uses its fleet of school buses to deliver food to families in need during the summer months when school is not in session.

Responding to Mental Health Crises

A few years back, Roma faced a difficult and tragic experience when a handful of suicides occurred among its young people. In a rural community, this type of crisis is particularly difficult because each death has multiple connections across the district and produces a deep impact no matter how small the number of suicides. The district responded by bringing in mental health service professionals who began to work with students and staff. When district leaders assessed the results of providing the additional counseling, they realized it was making an important difference and so made the commitment to make mental health professionals a permanent resource in the district. As one district leader described, "*We have three counselors that work throughout the district and they work with these kids in addition to our regular counselors. So the kids that have a little bit more issues, they work with these particular counselors. They're called LPCs, Licensed Professional Counselors.*"

Creating Extracurricular Activities that Reflect Student Culture and Interests

Roma ISD offers a wide variety of activities and organizations to students, particularly compared to what was available when their parents attended Roma schools. In addition to the typical band, baseball,

basketball, and track, students have many choices. The district offers several sports, such as golf, volleyball, tennis, power lifting, and wrestling. Roma also offers the traditional music of its Hispanic students' ancestors as well as contemporary Mexican American culture with Mariachi and Conjunto *(a contemporary form of Mexican American music bands)* music programs. Examples of the numerous accomplishments of these extensive programs are national championships for the district's Mariachi program and gold medals in bowling for its Special Olympics team. One district leader described the student enthusiasm saying, "*Conjunto, they thought it was going to be something small. It took off. The kids, they took off with it. I think the kids see the opportunity and jump on it. There is just a lot of things for the kids to do. And of course, the better you do, I guess the district looks better.*"

Summary

Roma ISD combines strong commitments to its students with willingness to think creatively and to welcome all ideas and possibilities. These approaches to education include adapting the conditions of the district's rural setting to strengths that serve educators, students, and the community as a whole. The district is proficient at all of the key practices of high-functioning districts and particularly excels at organizational coherence, leadership, use of data, and nonacademic supports for students.

Sharyland Independent School District

Staff at Sharyland Independent School District (ISD) are quick to tell visitors that the district is its own community. Located in the city of Mission, Texas, in the Rio Grande Valley, Sharyland ISD is a 26-square-mile island serving 10,000 students (Sharyland Independent School District, n.d.). With just two high schools, two middle schools, and eight elementary schools (as well as an advanced academic academy), Sharyland ISD is small but mighty. Led by Superintendent Robert O'Connor, PhD, the district is committed to the maxim *"Excellence is our tradition."* And excellent they are: In the previous three academic years, nine of Sharyland's 12 schools were designated as High Performing or High Progress. This is a point of immense pride for Sharyland's 1,300-person staff. As one teacher boasted, *"We thrive. If you look at other school districts in the Valley, we are one of the highest performing in the entire state when it comes to academics."*

Students at Sharyland are a diverse group. In the 2015–16 school year, 61 percent of students were classified as economically disadvantaged, 29 percent were identified as ELLs, and 6 percent were identified for special education services. Students served by Sharyland ISD reflect the district's geographic location, which is about 15 miles from the Texas-Mexico border. Students are 93 percent Hispanic, 4 percent White, and 2 percent Asian (Texas Education Agency, 2016). The district's leadership tells staff and students that these demographics, while important, are only one piece of the puzzle: *"You're 95 percent Hispanic, and you have your lowest socioeconomic status kids. There's just no excuse for not performing. Saying that is one thing, but walking that walk is really what I think we have embedded in Sharyland."* This is not just talk. Sharyland ISD has consistently received a TEA accountability rating of Met Standard, earning distinctions in Postsecondary Readiness in 2014, 2015, and 2016.

In the late spring of 2017, researchers from TEA and TXCC visited Sharyland to conduct interviews and focus groups with district stakeholders. Through these conversations, the research team determined four key practices that contribute to Sharyland's success:

- Leadership
- Strategic Planning
- Collaboration
- Family and Community Engagement

The following sections highlight those practices, drawing on the information provided during the spring site visits.

Leadership

The first key practice exhibited by Sharyland ISD was strong and visionary leadership at all levels. Interview and focus group respondents reported that Sharyland ISD had both a visionary superintendent and a cohesive school board with aligned priorities.

Aligning Superintendent Priorities with Mission and Vision

There are many high-performing districts in the Valley, and staff members at the Region 1 ESC attribute a large part of that success to district leadership, saying, *"We have tremendous leaders across our region."* According to Sharyland ISD employees, Dr. O'Connor is no exception. In his second year as superintendent at the time of the site visit, Dr. O'Connor came to Sharyland with 10 years of experience in the role and a track record for school turnaround. Board members, district administrators, and community partners all said the superintendent's highest priority is the students. When asked what Dr. O'Connor cares about the most, one interviewee in Sharyland ISD said: *"He cares about the students' learning. That's what he cares about. He loves the students…. He just loves seeing them learn. He loves seeing the way they learn and he loves watching the teachers teach them."* Participant descriptions of Dr. O'Connor's priorities closely reflect the district's mission statement to *"inspire, educate, and empower all students to reach their full potential and become leaders of the highest moral character."* The statements the superintendent made during his interview aligned with this mission. Dr. O'Connor's commitment to excellence has been communicated and passed on to others in the district office, with one district staff member describing the general response to his leadership style: *"I think academically people just, they want to excel. They believe in their leaders and they believe in the kids."* The superintendent's clear priorities—high academic performance and a focus on the whole child—and their alignment with the district's mission and values set the tone for other leaders in the district, especially the Sharyland School Board.

Leveraging Board Member Expertise and Trusting District Leaders

Sharyland has an eight-person school board (including the superintendent) filled with local business and community leaders, as well as several current and former educators. During individual interviews, board

members repeatedly emphasized their commitment to a unified front and their trust in and deference to the superintendent. Each board member serves on several committees (e.g., the Technology Committee and the Curriculum Committee) and are assigned to those committees based on each member's professional expertise and personal experiences. The committees include district staff and school representatives and are aligned with the priorities of the district's strategic plan. Within these committees, the board members monitor school progress on the strategic plan and draft policies for the district.

Board members were insistent that they consider their primary role to be supporting the superintendent. As one district leader stated, the board does not *"use politics for anything else here outside of just basically setting policy on whatever the superintendent gives recommendations on so that he can manage correctly."* Interviewed board members felt it was their responsibility to set the tone and the culture for the district, with the ultimate goal being respect: *"Respect to the district, respect to the superintendent, respect to the teachers…keeping the tradition that has been said for decades, the communities around us have respected who we are as a district as a whole."* In speaking with others in the district, it was clear that the respect the board gives, it receives in return. This sentiment was shared in focus groups, where one principal said of the Sharyland ISD school board, *"They care about our reputation.… They don't care about politics."* Instead, stakeholders said, the board is primarily focused on serving the students and teachers and making sure the budget is balanced. The example set by the superintendent and the rest of the board is closely followed by school administrators.

Supporting Principal Leadership and Autonomy

The superintendent and board members at Sharyland describe a culture of school autonomy in which principals are largely trusted to make decisions for their schools. Districts leaders attributed part of Sharyland's success to its flexibility, citing the superintendent's willingness to not be too prescriptive when working with school administrators. As one district leader advised: *"If you get too structured, you lose your creativity and your opportunity to be spontaneous around some challenge that you see on one campus. We have eight elementary [schools].… They have different needs and different challenges. We try to have the pillars established, but then we have to give them some flexibility."* This understanding of the need to customize or individualize decision making for each school was an ongoing theme throughout interviews and focus groups. For example, a member of district leadership said that district leaders are *"smart enough to have confidence in the school, the individual school administrators that we have in place in order to let them run their schools to the best of their ability [and] make their own decisions."* Principals who participated in the focus groups agreed: *"[The Superintendent] allows us to be better and learn more and grow in our capacity."*

Beyond empowering school-level leadership, district administrators also reported that the district strategically promotes leaders directly from Sharyland schools to central office positions, giving principals an opportunity to advance their careers. As one teacher summarized, *"The district does a great job building leaders within."* The superintendent said part of the philosophy at Sharyland ISD is providing staff with an opportunity to take on more responsibility. A district leader said school administrators *"represent themselves in the best possible light knowing that they might have an opportunity if they stay and showcase themselves."* Stakeholders said supporting principal growth and promoting from within have both encouraged retention and helped the district maintain its culture—what interview and focus group participants called "the Sharyland Way."

Strategic Planning

The second key practice exhibited by Sharyland ISD was strategic district planning that includes specific long-range goals. Sharyland ISD worked with a variety of stakeholders to develop strategic or district improvement plans that specify long-range goals and objectives, and the district routinely monitors progress to promote accountability and ensure effectiveness.

Convening Stakeholders

At Sharyland ISD, leaders brought on independent consultants to support the development of a five-year strategic plan customized to the districts' specific needs. A member of district leadership described the initial process: *"Dr. O'Connor hired someone to walk us through it and prepare us, a consultant that had helped him in other school districts and they were excellent. They helped us focus. They explained how to develop an effective and realistic strategic plan."* The strategic planning committee at Sharyland ISD went through an iterative process, beginning with the consultants, superintendent, and school board making a long list of priorities. *"After that,"* one participant said, *"we brought in the administrative teams, and after that, we brought in teachers and community members and volunteers and just a slew of people who had the same interest that we did and again, to devote ourselves to the success of the school district."* Stakeholders cited the input they received from district and school staff, as well as family and community members, as an important part of plan development. District leaders told interviewers that bringing in a large group of stakeholders was essential to customizing the plan to the needs of the district: *"[The plan] has a lot of people who put input. Even though there are these broad categories you see in a lot of the plans, the action steps are really geared towards [Sharyland]."* Interview and focus group participants said that in total, more than 150 community members and district employees helped to develop the strategic plan.

Determining Priorities

The Sharyland ISD strategic plan includes five domains: Teaching and Learning; Human Capital; Values and Ethics; Technology; and Finance, Facilities, Safety, and Security. In order to make the process of determining the central priorities for the plan less unwieldy, the district identified a core group of around 30 people who served as the oversight team, which a member of the team described as about half community members and half district-level staff. This core group identified the five overarching priorities and from there, the oversight committee *"passed down [development of] the action steps to other school and staff.… Each category had their own data that they looked at. They looked at when they went down to those subcommittees, basically to develop the actions."* The oversight committee was strategic about who they assigned to lead and participate on each subcommittee. For example, one interviewee said the Teaching and Learning subcommittee was *"led [by the] deans of instruction on the campuses. The overarching person responsible for Teaching and Learning was the assistant superintendent of curriculum."* The subcommittees were responsible for examining data, determining areas of weakness, and setting benchmarks for accountability.

Monitoring Progress Through Accountability Measures

Stakeholders who participated in the creation of the Sharyland strategic plan said it was important to include measurable outcomes. As one district administrator reported, *"We decided as a community that we need an in-depth audit of our curriculum, and facilities, and all of those things, and equity. So, through that, we'd be finding out a lot of things that were deficient."* These audits provided the district with baseline data upon which to build accountability benchmarks. Progress monitoring and incentives were built into the strategic plan. An interviewee said an important element of developing the strategic plan was to choose domains that they could *"measure from year to year."* Interview and focus group participants provided a number of examples of benchmarks. The district wants to update all of its technology, so one goal is to replace 20 percent of their technology every year of the plan until everything is updated. One participant enthusiastically described the district's goals around human capital: *"We want to accomplish these six things to value our employees. Whether it be giving them a bonus, whether it be cooking for them you know the board and the superintendent cooking for them once a year, or waiving their dependent premiums for health insurance one month."* Stakeholders described using a variety of data to develop the benchmarks, including discipline referrals, student participation in extracurricular activities, district expenditures, and teacher surveys to monitor plan progress. Interview and focus group participants described progress monitoring as ongoing, with an annual review at the end of each year that is open to the public.

Collaboration

The third key practice exhibited by Sharyland ISD was a collaboration across departments and schools throughout the district. Sharyland ISD has effective systems and processes to promote levels of collaboration that enhance teaching and learning for all students, including communities of practice for principals, a culture of open collaboration throughout the district central office, and an eagerness to learn from and share knowledge with other districts in the Valley.

Establishing Communities of Practice for Principals

Focus groups with elementary and secondary principals demonstrated to researchers the spirit of collegiality Sharyland has fostered among its school administrators. Principals meet on a monthly basis to collaborate, and there is always a least one district administrator present. During these meetings, the elementary and secondary curriculum specialists will meet with their respective principal groups to discuss curriculum and provide input on districtwide decisions that affect their campuses. Interview and focus group participants said this level of collaboration is critical to the district's success: *"If we are going to implement something at the district level, I think it is very important that we have their consensus. So, our rule is majority rules. We want to acknowledge and honor everybody's needs or preferences, but if there's something that needs to be standardized, majority rules."* These meetings also provide principals with an outlet to troubleshoot common issues or learn from their colleagues. District administrators said this monthly opportunity for principal collaboration naturally facilitates buy-in for best practices: *"A campus picks up a best practice because the principal had the courage to go down this pathway. It works, and then before you know it the other campuses are asking, they want to [do the same thing]."* Learning from one

another, principals said, has developed them as leaders and has contributed a spirit of collegiality that motivates them to stay in the district. As one principal summarized, *"It's special…having that connection to where there's always somebody you can call…even call them at the other side of the district, and know that it's valid support [and] that we can trust each other."* This level of collaboration is something participants reported to researchers at all levels of the organization—whether formalized, like principal communities of practice or teacher professional learning communities, or more informal, like the collaboration described between district departments.

Communicating Across Central Office Departments

At Sharyland, one district administrator said, *"There's not one department that works on an isolated level. We all come together. We all meet together. We all help support each other. It's beautiful."* Interview and focus group participants shared numerous examples of cross-departmental collaboration with researchers. For example, the ELL coordinator works directly with the elementary director to determine the programming that needs to happen for the ELL students on the elementary campuses. The two coordinators work together using their individual expertise, available student performance data, and the information shared with the elementary curriculum specialist during the monthly principal meetings. The ELL and special education coordinators also work closely with each other to meet the needs of individual students identified for both services. In another case, the parental engagement coordinator reviews data with the curriculum specialists to identify what materials need to be sent home with their students and to develop materials explaining the activities to parents. In general, stakeholders attributed the ease of communication between departments as a natural by-product of being a small, close-knit district that prioritizes trust, mutual respect, and honoring their shared mission. As one leader stated, all district staff *"know that they're accountable for students' success. There's not one of them that doesn't have the pride and the drive to push to be the best.… That's part of our culture."*

Collaborating with Other Districts in the Valley

At Sharyland, part of being the best means being willing to learn from and share with other districts in the Rio Grande Valley. An educator in Sharyland ISD said of its relationship with neighboring districts, *"We are competitive with each other, but we are always communicating with each other: healthy competition."* This theme—healthy competition—was repeated multiple times during the site visit in all four districts. Interview and focus group participants generally reported that in order to be the best, you have to feel as though you are competing with the best. This often means learning from other districts. For example, one district leader said that Sharyland is looking into starting a health science academy: *"We visited three local [districts].… They're our competitors, but they opened their doors to us and so, we started these conversations, and then I'm like, 'Any time you want, come over!'"* Sometimes this collaboration happens as a result of individual initiative within the district. Other times, these interactions are facilitated by the Region 1 ESC. Sharyland interview and focus group participants described their ESC as *"awesome"* and expressed appreciation for the coordination of nearly 40 districts and charter systems. The Region 1 districts meet on a monthly basis, during which administrators *"share what's working in your district, what's not working, how you're able to maintain, let's say, in performance-based monitoring analysis.… That gets shared; 'Okay, who took that initiative?*

What's going on? Who's the teacher?' and we do that." Sharyland interview and focus group participants said they enjoy collaborating with their neighboring districts and consider it their responsibility to share best practices with others in the Valley. As one department head summarized: *"All of these kids are still our community. Whether they go to this high school or the other high school, one district or another, we're still the same community."* And, in Sharyland, community is central to student success.

Family and Community Engagement

The fourth key practice strongly exhibited by Sharyland ISD was a commitment to strong family and community engagement practices. At Sharyland, a commitment to engaging community stakeholders can be found at the highest level of the district. One interviewee said, *"[Dr. O'Connor] has a listening ear. His involvement, his participation not only with us here directly, the participation on the campuses, his participation in the community events [and with] community individuals is exceptional."* Throughout our conversations with Sharyland employees, it became clear that the district prioritizes family and community engagement and leverages these relationships to support student learning.

Consulting Community Members

Sharyland has a district-level coordinator for community relations as well as community liaisons on several of the campuses. The coordinator ensures that each campus improvement plan includes the necessary community engagement piece. In addition, district leadership has established an advisory committee composed of business and community leaders who offer their input, expertise, and observations from working with graduates of the Sharyland school system. One administrator said the district asks these community leaders, *"What are your needs? What are you seeing from our graduates? Where do you feel they're lacking, and where can we grow in our programs to meet those needs that you have in your business?"* The feedback from the advisory committee is used to inform the curriculum and determine what kind of technology the district needs to acquire in order to make sure students are competitive in the local job market. In many ways, stakeholders at Sharyland reported, the district's success can be attributed to the strength of the community: *"Whether it's a parent, whether it is the community business, whether it's something to where it's actually a farm that we're working directly with, whether it's a local hospital, whether it's local childcare facilities… Everybody's doing what they got to do. Together we can make this stronger."* The most frequently cited example of the critical role the surrounding community plays in supporting the district was the Education Foundation.

Receiving Support from the Local Education Foundation

The Sharyland Education Foundation is a 501(c) (3) nonprofit tax-exempt philanthropic organization that includes community members, some of whom are parents of Sharyland students. The Education Foundation hosts events and raises funds to support the district, most frequently in the form of scholarships and grants to teachers. One interviewee said the grants from the Education Foundation help supplement the budget and encourage innovation: *"They give [teachers] grants, and they get to pursue something fun and unique: literature, arts, science, all the way around. Whatever they want… They get a good*

grant, and they get to pursue something more." Teachers must apply for the grants, either individually or in groups, and outline their plan for using the funds to enhance instruction. A stakeholder described the depth and breadth of these grants: *"It can be anywhere from reading to a library to a class pet that they want to have. We've also done drums, we have done photography, we've done books. We've pretty much done it all."* Funds are raised from individual donations as well as through community events. For example, the Education Foundation hosts an annual fundraiser, Denim and Diamonds, where they honor prominent community members, host a concert, sell table tickets, and have a silent and live auction. The Education Foundation also hosts an annual Community Market Day, which is a free event filled with food, music, local vendors, and activities for families. Stakeholders overwhelmingly agreed that the investment the larger community has made in Sharyland has been integral to the district's success.

Designating Staff to Coordinate Parental Engagement Efforts

Interview and focus group participants spoke highly of their students' families and largely attributed the district's success to the engagement and commitment of Sharyland's family members. As one leader summarized: *"Our families are the reason why we do so well.... It is the foundation of this district. Lots of good families, lots of informed families. A lot of families that want their children to do well, want their children to do better than them."* Staff at Sharyland ISD recognize the important and unique role families play in their children's education, and they have several important structures in place to support family engagement. At the district level, there is a parental engagement coordinator responsible for all of the programming and district communications. In addition, several campuses have part-time parental liaisons who work closely with the district parental engagement coordinator to engage parents. Stakeholders said the district is interested in placing parental liaisons in every school.

Sharyland also offers a variety of classes for parents, including English as a second language (ESL) and GED courses, as well as nutrition and technology classes. Stakeholders said supporting parent learning is an essential part of supporting student learning: *"Our goal is not just to have the parents learn English… but the more specific, working with your child and homework, how to communicate with your teacher, and it's all embedded into the ESL classes. I just feel that parents being involved is a very important component."* Interview and focus group participants also noted that they use the Skyward Family Access system to share all critical information with parents—a program for which they also provide parent training.

Summary

Although many districts with high proportions of students who are classified as economically disadvantaged continue to struggle with academic achievement, there are districts with similar socioeconomic conditions in which students and schools have significant academic accomplishments. Sharyland is one of these districts. The educators in this district, like their peers at several other districts in the Rio Grande Valley, demonstrate a deep commitment to education as a means of improving the lives of their students, their families, and the surrounding community. During the site visit to Sharyland, the elements of that commitment particularly shone in the areas of leadership, strategic planning, collaboration, and family and community engagement.

According to interview and focus group participants, Sharyland's leadership is strong and visionary, starting with Dr. O'Connor, the superintendent, and continuing down through the school board and school principals. These individuals are united around a shared vision, they inspire academic achievement and high moral character, and they are leading by example. Sharyland also has a five-year strategic plan in place that serves as a guiding document for the district's priorities. It was created with input from more than 150 stakeholders—including teaching staff and community members—and includes specific, measurable goals with benchmarks. Interview and focus group participants attributed much of their success to a culture of collaboration. The district has formal structures in place to ensure principals and teachers have opportunities to share their best practices and successes across the district. Departments across the district take advantage of their small size to seek input from one another in their decision making. Sharyland administrators also leverage their proximity to other high-performing districts to learn new ways to approach common problems and lend support to neighboring districts whenever opportunities arise. Finally, the district demonstrates a dedication to developing strong community partnerships through their Education Foundation and engaging families with a variety of classes.

All these elements—leadership, strategic planning, collaboration, family and community engagement—contribute to the extraordinary achievements of Sharyland Independent School District. The sense of pride and tradition expressed by all the participating stakeholders served to reinforce the district's ongoing commitment to excellence.

Conclusion

The four districts examined in this case study reflect a sampling of the strong school and district performance in a region of Texas where poverty rates are high, thus refuting the common assumption that low income automatically produces low academic performance. In a place where the community believes their children and youth are as capable as those anywhere in the nation, accomplishments have become normal. When the schools and districts and all educators remain focused on strong practices of instruction, curriculum, leadership, academic and nonacademic supports, and the other key practices discussed here, the students continue to perform at high levels.

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Appendix: Critical Success Factors

The following CSFs are foundational elements within the framework of TAIS, developed by TEA and TCDSS. These CSFs will serve as key focus areas in school improvement planning. The CSFs documented are grounded in evidence-based research and have been found to be key elements for implementing improvement efforts. All of these research-based measures, when taken as a whole, are key to continuous school improvement.

1.   Improve Academic Performance
Academic performance is the foundational CSF. By ensuring the CSFs of teacher quality, effective leadership, data-driven instructional decisions, productive community and parent involvement, efficient use of learning time, and maintaining a positive school climate, campuses can increase performance for all students.

2.   Increase the Use of Quality Data to Drive Instruction
The use of quality data to drive instructional decisions can lead to improved student performance This CSF emphasizes effective uses of multiple sources of disaggregated data. However, it is not necessarily the amount of data used but rather how the information is used. For example, academic achievement can improve when teachers create regular opportunities to share data with individual students. Therefore, it is not only the use of data to drive instructional decision making that is significant but also the ongoing communication of data with other people or groups that provides the greatest opportunity for data to have a positive impact on student learning outcomes.

3.   Increase Leadership Effectiveness
Leadership effectiveness targets the need for leadership on campus to exhibit characteristics and skills known to promote and implement positive educational change. Of the elements proven to have the greatest degree of impact on student achievement, school leadership is second only to classroom instruction.

4.   Increase Learning Time
To be used successfully, increased learning time must be applied strategically. Effective strategies include providing a rigorous, well-rounded education that prepares students for college, improving teacher training, improving and aligning the curriculum, reducing distractions, implementing year-round schedules, providing block scheduling, using the time for teachers to thoroughly analyze and respond to data, and setting aside time to coach and develop teachers in ways that continuously strengthen their instructional practices.

5.   Increase Family and Community Engagement
Family and community engagement calls for increased opportunities for input from parents and the community, as well as for effective communication and access to community services. Parent, family, and community involvement has a direct correlation with academic achievement and school improvement. When school staff, parents, families, and surrounding communities work together to support academic achievement, students tend to earn higher grades, attend school longer and more regularly, and eventually enroll in programs of higher education.

6.   Improve School Climate

A focus on the development of a campus's climate as a learning environment is fundamental to improved teacher morale and student achievement. Formally assessing and addressing school climate is essential to any school's effort toward successful reform, achievement, and ability to make a difference for underprivileged student groups. Indicators of a positive school climate and welcoming learning environment are increased attendance and reduced discipline referrals.

7.   Increase Teacher Quality

Teacher quality focuses on the need to recruit and retain effective teachers while supporting and enhancing the knowledge and skills of current staff with job-embedded professional development. Over two decades of research has demonstrated a clear connection between teacher quality and increased student performance. Local education agencies and campuses can have a direct impact on student achievement through the effective implementation of a comprehensive teacher quality program.

These CSFs reflect behavioral changes that must be demonstrated by students at the campus and district or by adults working on their behalf. The effective implementation of each CSF is crucial in school efforts to meet stated goals and objectives. CSFs must also be monitored using measurable performance indicators. It is these indicators that will enable campus and district staff to determine whether schools and programs are on track to achieve their desired outcomes.