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

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

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

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

1. Rigorous college-ready instruction in all middle and high schools
2. Career and technical education (CTE) pathways aligned with the local economy’s needs
3. District-sponsored counseling located on college campuses to support recent high school graduates in the transition from high school to college
4. Schools designed specifically for off-track youth and dropouts

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

Reengaging School Dropouts

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

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

- The district raised its four-year high school graduation rate from 62 percent in School Year (SY) 2006–07 to 90 percent in SY 2013–14.
In SY 2010–11, 1,700 PSJA high school students (22 percent) took college courses from South Texas College and other college partners. By SY 2013–14, that number rose to 2,800 (33 percent of students).

In 2013, 103 graduating seniors (5 percent of that year’s graduating class) received an associate’s degree or college-level certification. By 2014, that number increased to 370 (21 percent of the graduating class).

Since 2007, CCTA has graduated 1,000 former high school dropouts and the annual district dropout rate has fallen by 75 percent.\(^\text{12}\)

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

**Guiding Questions**

- Does the district have the capacity to offer both high-quality general education and vocational training to students?
- Does the district have sufficient financial resources available, or the ability to acquire necessary resources, to support a districtwide early college initiative?
The Alliance for Excellent Education is a Washington, DC–based national policy, practice, and advocacy organization dedicated to ensuring that all students, particularly those traditionally underserved, graduate from high school ready for success in college, work, and citizenship. www.all4ed.org

The Johns Hopkins Institute for Education Policy (the Institute) believes that building partnerships across different constituencies is necessary to advance excellence and equity for all of America’s children. The Institute operates on the understanding that education policy must be informed both by real-world conditions and also by excellent research; that it is possible to translate the technical vocabularies of research into a language that is accessible and useful to policy experts, principals, teachers, and parents; and that in our richly diverse nation, education must be driven and sustained by evidence about what works and what does not.
edpolicy.education.jhu.edu/

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Endnotes


3 Berger et al., Early College, Continued Success.


7 Educate Texas is a public-private initiative of Communities Foundation of Texas that works statewide to increase postsecondary readiness for students from low-income families.


10 Le, Launching Early College Districtwide.


Photos by Allison Shelley/The Verbatim Agency for American Education: Images of Teachers and Students in Action