



# COLLEGE BOUND & DETERMINED

FOR ONE SCHOOL DISTRICT  
TRANSFORMATION WENT BEYOND  
CHANGING SOBERING GRADUATION  
RATES OR EVEN GETTING GRADUATES  
INTO COLLEGE. THIS DISTRICT WAS  
TO CHANGE HOW WE THINK ABOUT  
COLLEGE READINESS

Children First  
**IDRA**  
— Transforming Education



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# PREFACE Framing Systems Change for Student Success

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The pipeline, or path, from pre-kindergarten to high school graduation and success in higher education, is marked by cracks and disjunctures. In many cases, students experience no connection between early education and secondary school, much less between high school graduation and higher education. Without strong connections in the education pipeline, too few Texas students transition from secondary schools to four-year universities. And fewer still are prepared to go on to earn bachelor's, master's or doctoral degrees. As an indispensable conduit to college, graduation with a diploma backed by an excellent education must be a focal point for systems change. It also must be central to any efforts for reform.

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IDRA's latest high school attrition study shows that Texas high schools lose one out of every four students before they graduate. Since 1986, schools in Texas have lost a total of more than 3.3 million students. Despite small improvements over the last several years, at the current pace, universal high school education is almost a quarter century away. By then, Texas is projected to lose another 3 million students who will leave schools without a diploma and without even minimal preparation to compete in a rapidly changing workforce.<sup>1</sup>

For those students who do graduate, only one out of five enrolls in a Texas public university the following fall. Thirteen out of 19 public universities in Texas graduate fewer than half of their students; six graduate less than a third. This picture is not very different across the country. If Texas continues on this course, education cannot fulfill its promise as a path to opportunity for all. Instead it represents a vanishing future.<sup>2</sup>

The majority of jobs already require some level of education beyond high school. By 2018, nearly two-thirds of U.S. jobs will require at least some college education. The Alliance for Excellent Education reports that if we had increased the graduation rate for the Class of 2012 to 90%, gains for Texas' economy would be \$919 million in increased annual earnings, \$729 million in increased annual spending, \$1.3 billion in increased home sales, \$78 million in increased auto sales, 7,600 new jobs, \$1.2 billion in increased annual gross state product, \$143 million in increased federal tax revenue, and \$42 million in increased annual state/local revenues.<sup>3</sup>

Clearly, to achieve different results, we must envision a dramatically different process and undertake a new strategy. IDRA has outlined one such process: the Quality Schools Action Framework. This framework is based on experience and empirical evidence that emerges from existing theories of change. These models suggest that because schools operate as complex, dynamic systems, lasting systems change depends on sustained action within and outside of those systems. Research on best practices of high performing schools, for example, has examined the links among a constellation of indicators (e.g., teaching quality and effective school governance; parent engagement and student success). Less examined, however, are the contextual and moderating factors that may impede or accelerate school system change. The Quality Schools Action Framework aims to bridge this gap. The framework offers a model for assessing school conditions and outcomes, identifying leverage points for improvement, and informing action. In essence, the framework poses five key questions: (1) What do we need? (2) How do we make change happen? (3) Which fundamentals must be secured? (4) Where do we focus systems change? and (5) What outcomes are we seeking? The framework draws on both current research and knowledge of the field. It also seeks to be intuitive and reflect common sense so that communities and educators can use a common language when advocating for change.

In this publication we seek to make the case that all students deserve an equitable, excellent and college bound education by using the Quality Schools Action Framework to tell the story of how one school district has brought that ideal closer to reality for all students.

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María "Cuca" Robledo Montecel, Ph.D.  
IDRA President & CEO (retired January 2019)

# INTRODUCTION

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The notion of higher education carries with it some vestiges of an elitist past where only students from the right families, of the right color, and of the right money would go to a university. Some positive changes have occurred to change this in the past 50 years. After WWII, veterans were afforded the opportunity get a secondary education, and because of it a new middle class was born. The *Civil Rights Act* of 1964 and the ensuing decades of work by tireless individuals and organizations to increase minority access to college through affirmative action have helped to diminish the effects of racism and classism in our educational institutions.

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But even with these changes in attitude and policy, we are far from closing college graduation gaps between minority and White students. In some instances, we are even turning back the clock, by enacting legislation aimed at diverting students from a college-going future and into trade and vocational education. Unfortunately, the idea that not all students are “college material” has seeped back into the national discussion, even after being discredited as harmful to economically disadvantaged students and the country. The idea is quickly gaining momentum in state legislatures and school boards. It is tragic that, after decades of struggling against negative attitudes toward minorities and socially disadvantaged students, the conventional belief is that not all students need to be prepared for college—all under the guise that students must be given “choices.”

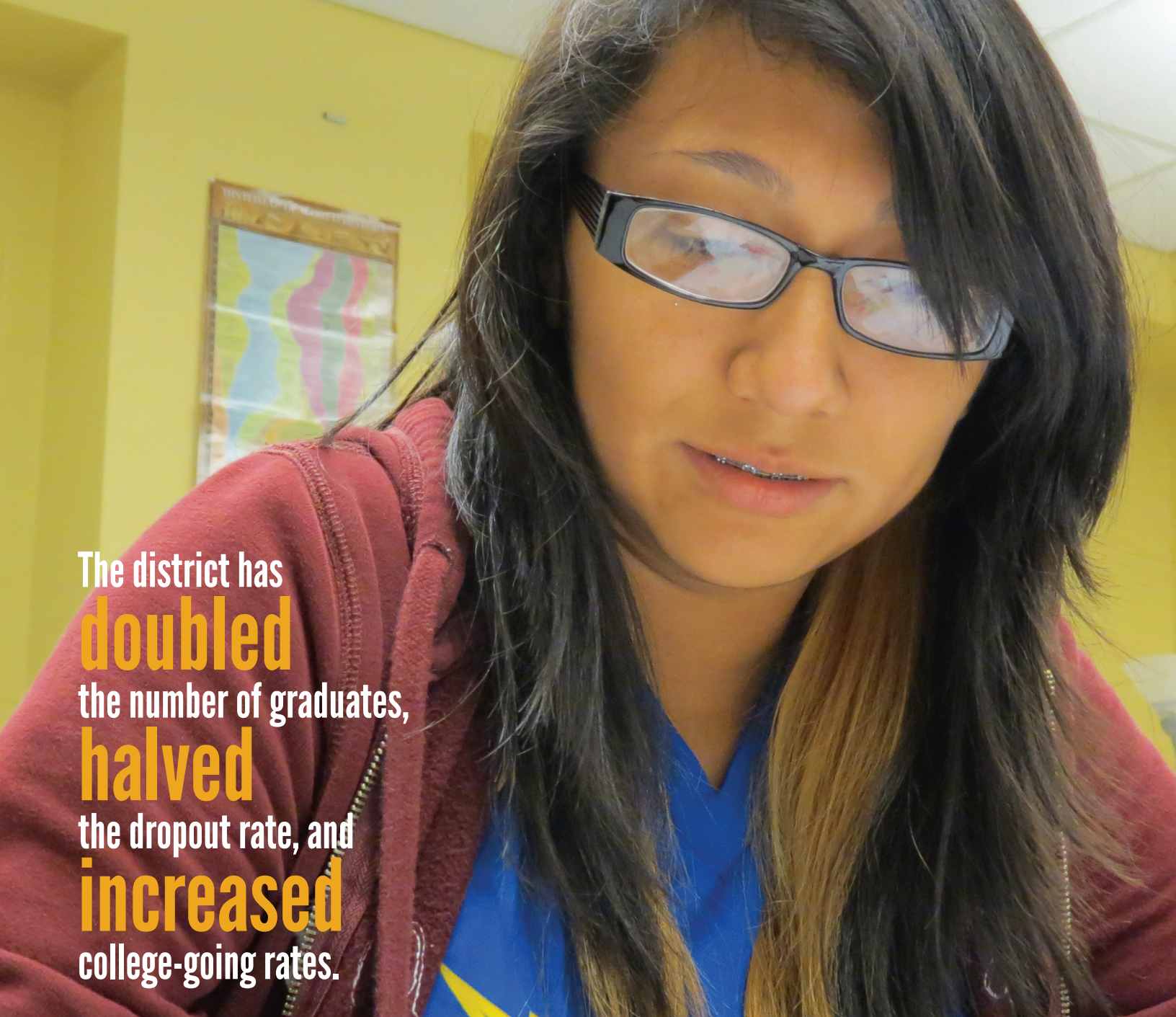
There is no choice here. In Texas, students will begin “choosing” whether they should go to college as early as eighth grade, years before they come to full consciousness about the advantages of a college education. This is not choice but a cruel hoax that lowers expectations and standards for all students. Who will decide who goes to college? An administrator who sees potential in already gifted students? Who will decide who goes to vocational tracks? Teachers and counselors who will make predictions about a student’s future based on their academic performance up to eighth grade? Recommendations will be made on perceptions of what a student has done and not on what a student can become with excellent and equitable education. Inevitably this hurts minority and poor students who now make up a majority in our schools. It doesn’t bode well for the economic future of the state. Businesses looking for college-educated students will soon find a generation of students who were sold on the idea that there will always be jobs for the vocation they “chose.” And why? Because we have let ourselves believe that there is no way we can prepare all students for college and true career readiness.

Yet, there is hope.

In the Rio Grande Valley, the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District (PSJA) has bucked all trends and proven these ideas wrong. Under the leadership of Superintendent Dr. Daniel King, PSJA has transformed itself from a district with low achievement and low expectations, into a district where all students are expected to graduate ready to start college. Its motto is College<sup>3</sup>. It stands for All Students: College Ready, College Connected and College Complete<sup>TM</sup>. And it is not simply a slogan. It is a way of doing business. It summarizes what is expected and guides how things are done.

This publication is meant to document some of what takes place at PSJA so that communities and schools across the country will advocate for meaningful change in their districts so that we may stem back the tide that threatens to dim our future.





The district has **doubled** the number of graduates, **halved** the dropout rate, and **increased** college-going rates.

This document was the result of interviews with PSJA educators: Superintendent King, school principals, teachers, counselors and students. Many hours were spent discussing how PSJA achieved the kind of success that it has. After several conversations with Dr. King it became almost self-evident that PSJA's vision and actions, clearly and independently aligned, with IDRA's own vision for change: the Quality Schools Action Framework.<sup>4</sup> This change theory helps communities and educators assess a school's conditions and outcomes and identify leverage points for improvement and informing action. The parallels between the framework, IDRA's vision and PSJA's processes were numerous. How this alignment occurred is not the subject of this document. We can only surmise that when students are valued and seen as solutions, similar paths rise and converge. This document explores PSJA's changes using IDRA's framework and ideas as organizing principles. The changes and processes we report are solely the result of PSJA's work. How we frame this change is IDRA's contribution to documenting PSJA's remarkable practices.



Photo by PSJA ISD

# PSJA'S VISION

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“Our vision can be boiled down to the phrase, College<sup>3</sup>, meaning that all students will be College Ready, College Connected and will complete College”

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PSJA's superintendent firmly rejects the idea that some students do not have the capacity to pursue college in the first place. Through Dr. King's leadership and collaboration with many educators at PSJA, the district has transformed itself from a low-performing school district to a powerhouse of change and ideas. Since 2007, the district has doubled the number of graduates, halved the dropout rate, increased college-going rates, as well as implementing policies focused on making high school more like college.

All of this has been accomplished in a school district that consists of what are typically underachieving schools in one of the most economically disadvantaged areas in the nation—the lower Rio Grande Valley of South Texas. There are no pockets of wealth and privilege that drive up numbers and statistics. There are no lotteries or other methods of excluding students. Dr. King and his staff are committed to the idea that student success is college access and completion for all. The district's motto, College<sup>3</sup>, means that with appropriate support, all students should “be college ready, connected to college, poised to complete college for a career ready future.” This commitment to results above and beyond the usual accountability is remarkable and unheard of in the state and country.

How these changes occurred and what lessons can be learned is the focus of this publication. In here you will find best practices and principles that can guide systemic transformation. First, it is important to tell the story of how PSJA's vision came to be put in practice.

Dr. King came to the PSJA during a time of turmoil and a seemingly endless stream of bad news coming from the district. Graduation rates were lower than they had been in years, several schools were designated as low performing, and district offices were in disarray after a series of highly publicized corruption scandals. Confidence in the district was non-existent. Staff morale was at an all-time low. Yet as Dr. King took office, after making successful changes in a neighboring and much smaller district, one of the first questions to his staff was: “What are our dropout numbers?” After the amount of tumult and bad press, this question must have seemed to be asking for trouble. After years of working in dysfunctional situations, no one was quick to answer in great detail and instead provided him with numbers that did not match reality. Eventually, true numbers surfaced. Approximately 500 students were being lost in the ninth to 12<sup>th</sup> grade. More specific and actionable data arose, when they found that many students were leaving very close to graduation. At this point, district leadership, traditionally takes the numbers into consideration and plans are made to increase credit recovery efforts over several years.

Instead, PSJA proposed to create a school campus to bring back students not just to get their diploma, but to start a college-going career path through credit recovery *and* dual credit classes. If the idea itself was groundbreaking, the speed at which it came to be is hard to believe. Within five weeks, PSJA's College, Career & Technology Academy was open for students, in partnership with South Texas College.

This began a series of changes that transformed an entire school district. Soon, dual credit classes were being offered all over the district, teaching practices changed to engage all students in a college-going future, the college readiness curriculum became the default curriculum for all students, students were becoming active participants in deciding their future. And the outcomes began to change. Dropout rates decreased while graduation and college-going rates increased. Suddenly the district was moving in the right direction.

Yet, the superintendent asked for more numbers about how many PSJA students were actually staying in college. He saw that the numbers of students “stopping-out” (leaving college within the first year) were unacceptable. It is safe to say that for the majority of school districts, a sense of responsibility stops at high school graduation. This did not occur at PSJA.



A photograph showing a man in a dark pinstriped suit jacket, white shirt, and patterned bow tie leaning over a table. He is looking down at a young man in a blue t-shirt with a yellow graphic. The young man is gesturing with his hands as if speaking. In the foreground, the back of another person's head and shoulder in a blue shirt is visible. The background shows a room with a ceiling light fixture, a string of colorful streamers, and an American flag on a stand.

**Here is a school district  
that believes responsibility does not end  
once students graduate but continues  
until they complete college.**

Photo by PSJA ISD





Photo by PSJA ISD

Again, in record speed, Dr. King began a transition specialist program where PSJA counselors are housed at local colleges and are responsible for helping students transition from high school to college. This is simply unheard of anywhere in the state. Yet, the pattern had emerged, unvarnished raw truthful data are analyzed, leverage points are identified and solutions are quickly put in place.

Here is a school district that believes its responsibility does not end once you graduate from high school but continues until you complete college. “Equity of opportunity” is a main tenant of PJSAs mission and vision. This means that every student, regardless of background, strengths, and weaknesses, has the right to pursue an excellent and equitable education. PSJAs superintendent firmly rejects the idea that some students do not have the capacity to pursue college in the first place. He is vocal that he wants to meet all students on their level and help them achieve success. Student success in PSJA can take on many different forms including getting a bachelor’s degree and graduate-level education, an associate’s degree, or even a certificate for a skilled occupation that can be used as a stepping-stone for higher education. He believes that every student deserves a real chance to go to college and pursue a career. This belief has permeated through the school district and community. Everyone shares in the vision that college and career readiness is the most basic objective at the district and that everyone must work toward actual completion of post-secondary goals.

**Here is a school district that believes its responsibility does not end once students graduate from high school but continues until they complete college.**



# A CHALLENGE TO TEXAS

## A Challenge to the Nation

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The existence of the kind of visionary work and success that is occurring in South Texas poses a challenge to Texas and to the country. Seeing the kind of results one sees at PSJA must lead all of us to ask: “Do I believe *all* of our children can be college ready?” If you hesitate, look at these facts.

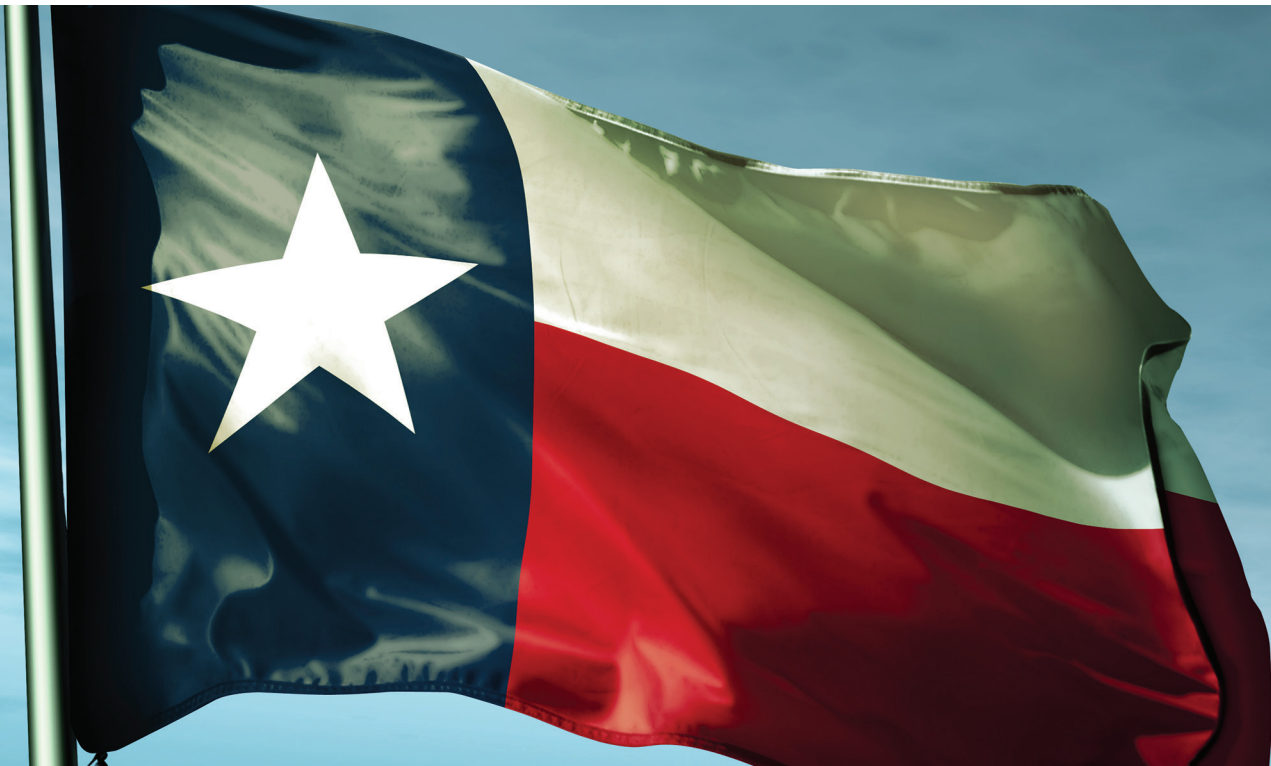
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In PSJA...

- Dropouts are seen as potential college material and are told: “You didn’t finish high school. Start college today!”
- Close to half of students are earning college credit while still in high school.
- In 2013, more than 100 students had graduated from high school with an associate’s degree or certificate.
- Accountability is not about simply passing the test.
- Accountability means having zero dropouts.
- Accountability means that the district transforms itself to an early college district with at least 500 students graduating with an associate’s degree by 2015.

It would be tragic if, as a nation, we did not take up the challenge presented to us by what PSJA has accomplished. At a time of diminished expectations and pessimism about our future work force, how can we not share in the vision of college for all? To do otherwise, is a disservice to our youth. What will we say to young people in the future, when their jobs have been outsourced and the country finds itself in yet another economic quandary, “Maybe we could have sent you to college, we just weren’t sure you could do it.”

There are no excuses and no limits except for the ones we put on ourselves.



# PRINCIPLES FOR TRANSFORMING A SCHOOL DISTRICT

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It would be a mistake to think of what is happening at PSJA as a program or a collection of initiatives or just a district that has a college-going culture. It is more accurate to think of PSJA's transformation as that of a district that made a conscious decision to scale-up early college high school models to the entire district. It is a transformation that raises, in actual fact, the expectations for all students. In this publication we explore how PSJA has accomplished such a radical transformation so that others may advocate for similar transformations in their community schools.

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These principles come from reviewing hours of interviews and observations. They were gleaned from many thoughts and statements made by key staff, but are the solely result of viewing PSJA's processes through IDRA's change model: the Quality Schools Action Framework. These principles are how we best present the process in which a district can make similar changes and is not meant to represent PSJA's evolving policies.

Families, educators, principals, superintendents, school boards and policymakers are invited to take away the following key principles from this document.

## **1. All students should be prepared for a college and career-ready future.**

Every student needs to be prepared for the future through a rigorous curriculum taught by qualified teachers in a school culture of high expectations. The recipe for preparing a student is not new and includes equitable funding, rigorous curriculum, qualified teachers, and engaging and meaningful educational practices. These concepts need to be applied to *all* students and not just to the top 15% of students who are deemed college-bound. As has been said of standardized tests, success in education is not a measure of intelligence, but what a lifetime of opportunity and privilege can afford. This is the role for the 21<sup>st</sup> century educator, to provide equitable educational opportunities to all students from prekindergarten to college completion.

## **2. Making high school more like college serves all students.**

At the heart of PSJA's transformation is a well thought out plan to transform the entire system into an early college district. Most of the changes you will read about deal with how PSJA has made college available to all students while being in high school. This is nothing short of revolutionary and must be taken as *the* most important change, since the entire system had to change to facilitate that goal.

## **3. A career-ready future is a college-bound future and not an end run to a vocational education.**

Career readiness initiatives must begin with the assumption that, in this modern world, there are no shortcuts to a successful career that do not include a college-bound future. It is a fact of modern life that without the rigor of college, students are ill prepared to succeed and maintain a good life full of economic opportunities. As the crash of 2008 reminded us, one can no longer be prepared only to work in industry or construction jobs because of the volatility of the free market. At any moment, the world hiccups, and our jobs are outsourced or vanish altogether because of technological advances. Educators must assume that all students must be prepared for uncertainty by preparing them with the highest rigor and not for lowest common denominator jobs.

## **4. Transforming our schools means transforming entire systems.**

IDRA has long held that to achieve equitable educational opportunities for all children, entire systems must be assessed and overhauled. From more than 40 years of research and experience, IDRA has outlined what systemic change looks like in our Quality Schools Action Framework. We propose that schools are systems with outcomes, inputs, fundamental needs, change strategies, change agents and valid data. Simply put, equitably funded school systems are transformed when families and educators know what is happening in our schools and take meaningful actions to change practices and policies. It is a framework where every aspect of educational systems is to be examined and transformed.





It is in that spirit that the PSJA experience embodies a simple but powerful message: Entire systems must change to transform. It is not enough to change one policy, set lofty goals, provide one training, change staff, institute a groundbreaking program or even change superintendents. Transformation occurs when educational institutions are viewed as systems with parts that work together, where expectations are raised at all levels, and groundbreaking approaches affect everything and everyone. As you read this document, keep in mind that simply taking one piece of the PSJA experience and implementing it will not be enough to transform a school district. If anything, this document is an appeal to families, educators and policymakers to look at changing the whole and not simply individual parts of a school system.

**The framework exemplifies the notion that change must happen at a system level, meaning that change occurs in many different places in a school and district.**

#### **5. Data transparency is an absolute prerequisite for authentic change to occur.**

A problem cannot be addressed without knowing the full extent of the situation. A school or district cannot fix a problem if it is not acknowledged that something needs to be fixed. When negative data arises, we must seize the opportunity to find causes and work toward addressing those issues. Too often in education there exists an unfortunate tendency to disregard bad news by killing the messenger or switching to brighter news. The public is left to wonder about the integrity of educators when we are not completely transparent about our challenges as we are about our successes. As you will see throughout this document, PSJA's leadership insists on being honest about data in order to honestly identify problems, set goals, evaluate progress and maintain positive community relationships. When everyone knows about challenges, everyone can share in bringing about solutions.

#### **6. Schools—not students, not families, not neighborhoods—must change.**

This is a powerful idea that must take root in the hearts and minds of all educators. When we are hit with bad news, poor test scores and poor college success data, all our thoughts must begin with the following question: "How can we change our schools to change this outcome?" Too often the responses offer a litany of mostly well-intentioned, refrains: "We must take care of the poverty issue before we can fix our schools." "Our parents need to be well educated for our scores to go up." "Language differences have caused this decline." "You can't expect poor children to do any better." Unfortunately, all of these sentiments can lead us to accept ideas, educational policies and practices that diminish the importance of higher education for all students. We must change our institutions to see our students and families as part of the solution rather than the source of the problem. IDRA has provided leadership in viewing families and students as assets instead of problems to be fixed, and, again, PSJA has shown success by implementing policies that embody this attitude.

# THE QUALITY SCHOOLS ACTION FRAMEWORK™

Based on years of field experience and research, IDRA published *Courage to Connect – A Quality Schools Action Framework™*, delineating the framework, a guide to school transformation. This document is organized around the Quality Schools Action Framework to show how change took place in PSJA in order to help other school districts with systemic transformation.

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As we look at how PSJA's transformation and the Quality Schools Action Framework are aligned, the following must be emphasized.

- PSJA's transformation took place independently of IDRA's framework.
- While IDRA has worked with PSJA over the years on implementing our STEM models Math Smart! and Science Smart!, bilingual programs and designed a smartphone app for use in a groundbreaking transition counseling program, PSJA's success is not the direct result of following the Quality Schools Action Framework. Yet, since the framework is empirically based and formulated from 40 years of field work, study and research, the alignment can be seen as another example of how the framework can describe positive change and prescribe actions.
- IDRA has been involved in many schools across the country and has provided technical assistance in helping educators transform their schools. In PSJA we have witnessed an entire district being transformed to provide equitable and excellent education for all.

Understanding how an entire school district can transform itself is a daunting task. The very first thing that one must understand is that there is no one single change, program or initiative that will transform an entire school district. Change must occur at many levels as current and desired outcomes must be analyzed, the necessary players must be identified and strategies must be implemented and evaluated. Simply as a way of describing change, the publication has been organized around the Quality Schools Action Framework in order to isolate the pieces of a system that needs to be identified and changed.

## What outcomes are we seeking?

### Outcome Indicators

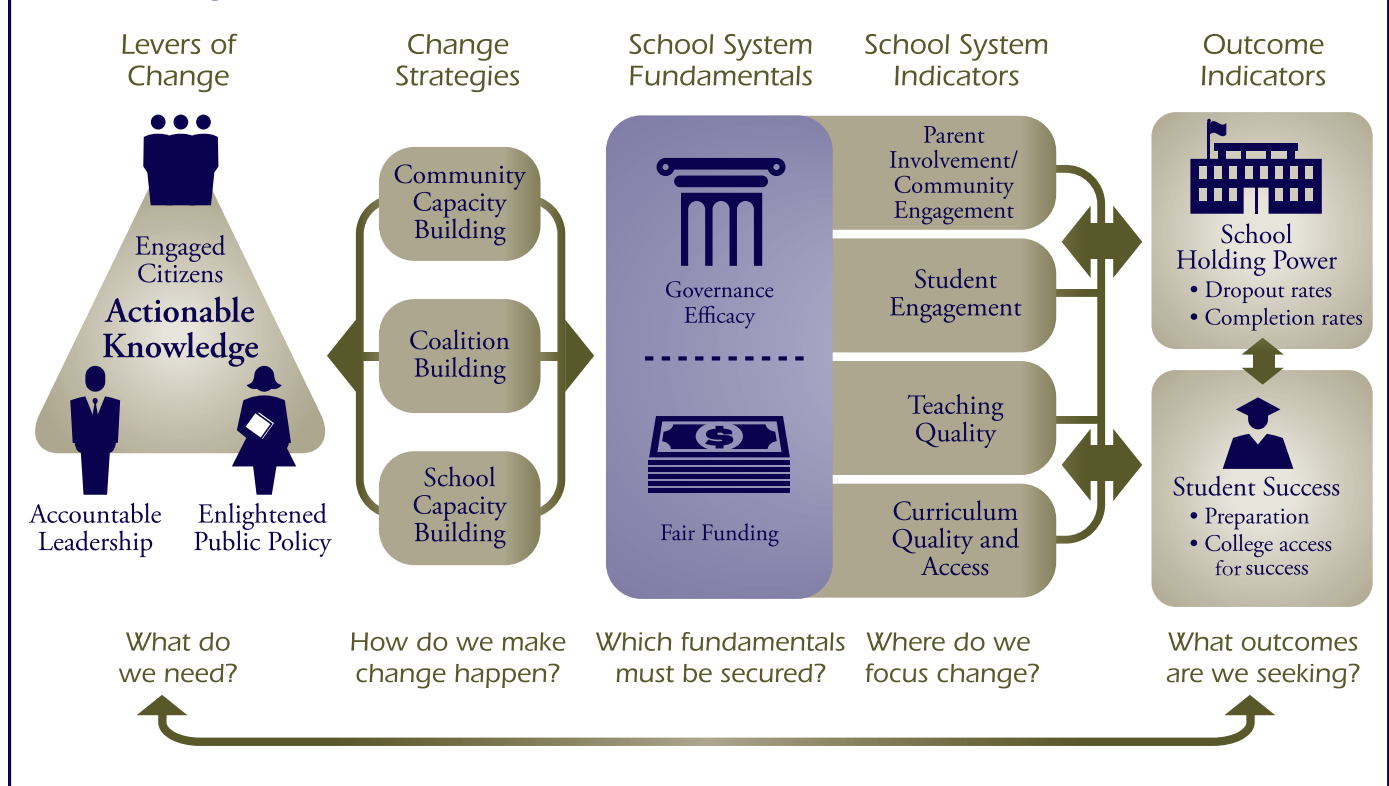
All change must begin by defining the end result we actually want. In order to do this, we must examine the hard data, which include school holding power and student success. The Quality Schools Action Framework begins with the end in mind: What educational outcomes are we seeking? The two most basic outcomes are school holding power and student success, which are defined as follows.

**School holding power** refers to the ability of schools to keep and graduate students. The phrase is meant to put emphasis on how schools are held accountable not on how well students perform. This counterintuitive notion is meant to remind us that schools must adapt to student needs. It does not mean that students have no responsibility in the matter, but that as educators we must focus on the success of our actions. To measure school holding power, one simply needs to find a school district's attrition data and graduation rates.

**Student success** has traditionally meant student performance on state-mandated tests. While this is important, defining a school system's success *only* to that being tested simply does not give us enough information about how well a student is prepared to enter and graduate from college. In order to measure true student success we must review the following school data: college preparation (SAT/ACT taking and success rates), college success (two-year and four-year college going rates immediately after high school graduation), and college retention (college readiness as defined by remedial college classes success rates). By concentrating on college access, success and readiness, we can begin to shift the conversation to college as *the* guiding accountability goal.



# Quality Schools Action Framework™



Intercultural Development Research Association

## How do we focus change?

### School System Indicators

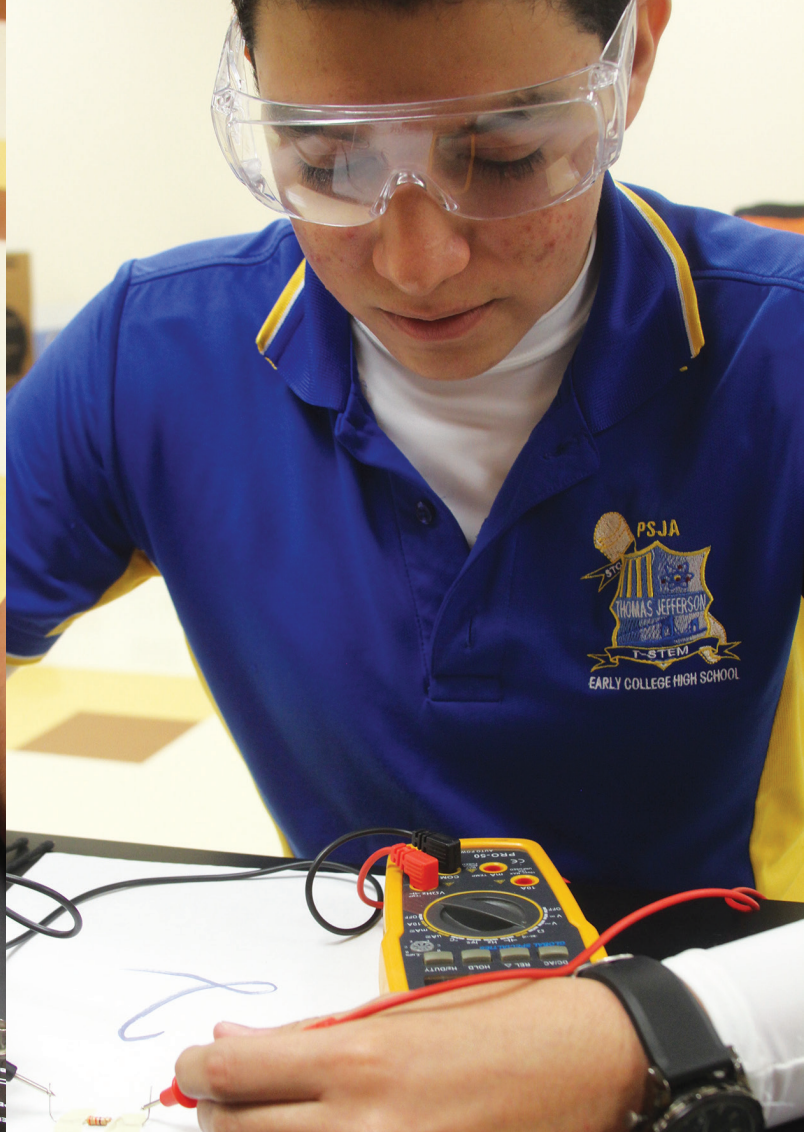
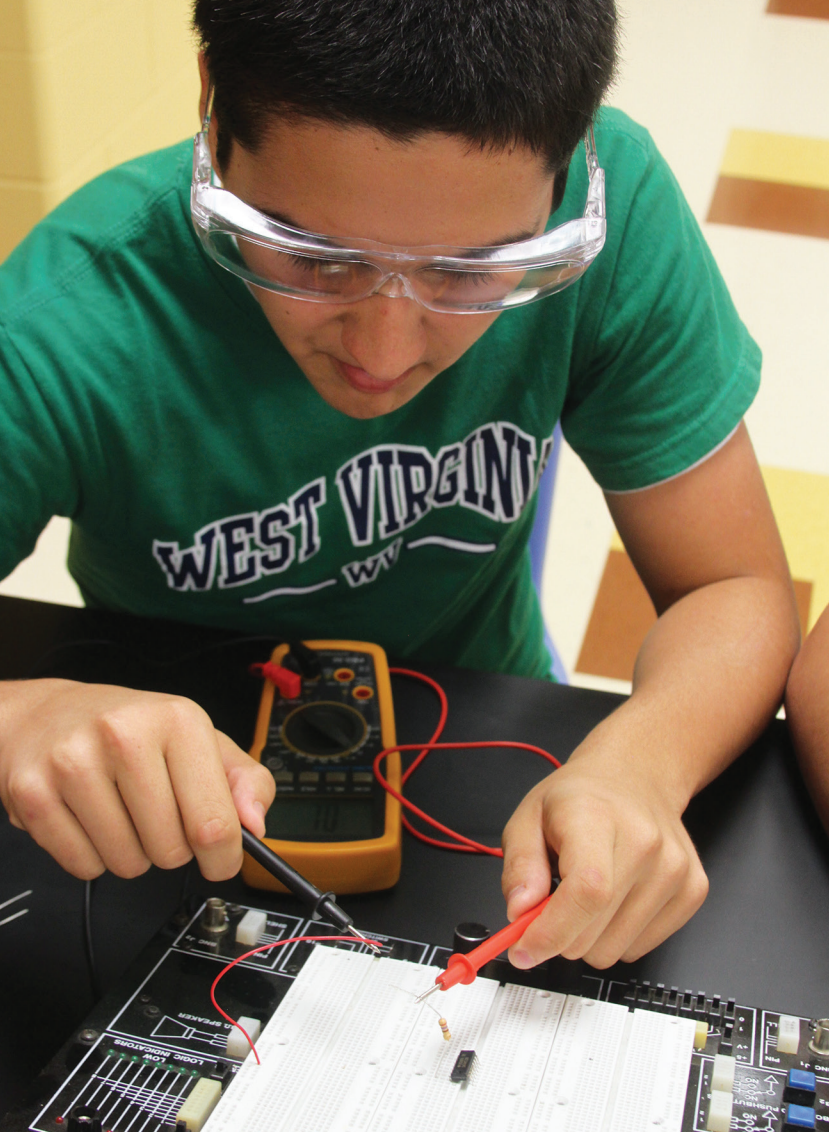
These indicators refer to where change must take place in order to achieve transformation. *Curriculum quality and access* refers to equitable access to meaningful coursework for all students, not simply those in the top 10%. *Quality teaching* is measured by fairly tangible means, such as the percentage of teachers certified to teach, percentage of teachers teaching in the field they are certified to teach, and percentage of teachers qualified to teach dual enrollment classes. At the bare minimum, all core content classes, like Algebra I and II, English language arts and science, should only be taught by teachers certified to teach in those areas. *Student engagement* refers to school environment and activities that value students and incorporate them into the learning process and other social activities within the school with academic achievement as a result. *Parent and community engagement* involves creating partnerships based on respect and a shared goal of academic success and integrating parents and community members into the decision making processes of the school. These indicators are what the district ultimately has control over at the classroom level and by involving the community and listening to student needs, student engagement and success will happen.

## What fundamentals must be secured?

### School System Fundamentals

Affecting change requires support from strong leadership and resources for change to happen. *Fair funding* is the availability of funds in a school district to support a quality educational program for all students. *Governance efficacy* is the capacity of administrative and supervisory personnel to deliver quality educational services to all students, along with the policymaking and pro-active support of a school board to hold on to every student. It is crucial that fair and equitable funding be provided to all schools as having school boards and administrators who are accountable for the academic well-being of all students.

**This is one of the key lessons: implementing early college models at all levels, for all students, raises the bar for everyone and changes how things are done.**



Photos by PSJA ISD

## How do we make change happen?

### Change Strategies

Since communities are unique, they each have their own context for building a learning environment. Rather than setting up programs in isolation, three strategies for changing schools accelerate and sustain impact systemwide. **School capacity building** refers to improving educational practices and policies at campuses. This can include quality professional development, student support services, and even complete restructuring of campuses. **Coalition building** refers to the ways in which individuals and groups from education, business, government, colleges and other interested parties may collaborate to ensure that educational policies are equitable and excellent. **Community capacity building** refers to training, workshops, partnership with community-based PTAs in which community members are understood to be of primary importance in demanding for equitable and excellent educational opportunities.

## What do we need to accomplish these things?

### Levers of Change

Levers apply force to move heavy objects. In systems change, levers give people advantage to accomplish work that might at first seem far beyond their strength and capacity. **Actionable knowledge** refers to hard solid facts about how a school is performing according to the outcomes and the indicators defined by the Quality Schools Action Framework. These data give all of the players a common place to diagnose challenges and plan accordingly. **Accountable leadership** refers to leaders at all levels of the educational system, including principals, superintendents and school board members. **Engaged citizens** refers to all members of the community, and **enlightened public policy** is about laws and policies set by school boards, the school board of education, state education agencies and state legislators.

This publication will show how accountable leadership at PSJA has been a key lever of change as most change has flowed from leadership at the district level. It is the leadership that examined the data, built capacity at the school level, built coalitions, and affected change in curriculum, teaching quality, student engagement and community engagement.



# THE OUTCOMES

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In order to understand the magnitude of transformation at PSJA, it is vital to start with what the district has accomplished. We will begin with how the district has fared in outcomes since the leadership change.

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## School Holding Power

PSJA has increased school holding power by adapting and enacting the many different levers of change described in the Quality Schools Action Framework. In 2007, when the real data about dropouts were analyzed, true change began by first addressing school holding power. As noted earlier, the district as a whole was in trouble with meeting required adequate yearly progress targets, academic achievement was stagnant, and the morale of the teachers and the students was at an all-time low. Yet, change began by addressing the problem with how unsuccessful schools were in holding and graduating students. The following numbers show the progress.

### Dropout Rates

- PSJA's attrition rate for Hispanic students in 2011-12 was 15% compared to 32% statewide.
- By 2018, PSJA's attrition rate was 7% compared to the 22% statewide. The attrition rate for their respective county was 29% by 2018
- In 2007, the dropout rate for PSJA was 13.6%, while the statewide rate was 11.4%.
- By 2018, PSJA's dropout rate had plummeted to 1.2%, lower than the state's 1.9%.

### Completion Rates

- In 2007, the number of students graduating from PSJA was 966 out of 1,614 seniors as reported by the Texas Education Agency. Only about 60% of seniors graduated in the 2006-07 school year.
- In 2012, the number of students graduating from PSJA doubled to 1,889 out of 2,016 seniors, meaning about 93% of seniors graduated in the 2011-12 school year.

## Student Success

IDRA maintains that the most important outcome indicators for student success are college preparation, college access and college success. Traditionally, IDRA has looked at SAT/ACT passing rates, college entrance, etc. But because PSJA has, above all other transformations, tried to make high school "more like college," we will be looking at what they have done to achieve results in the context of their remarkable changes.

## College Preparation, College Access and College Success

The district's motto is summarized as "college cubed" (College<sup>3</sup>). This means that the system must adapt to make sure that all students are "college ready, college connected, and college complete." Before examining efforts and results, it is important to reiterate that PSJA has been implementing changes throughout the system that are transforming the district into an early college district. This is one of the key lessons: implementing early college models at all levels, for all students, raises the bar for everyone and changes how things are done. All changes that have taken place have enabled students to experience college in high school, earn college credits in high school and even earn associate's degrees by the time they graduate from high school. Therefore the traditional route of taking SAT/ACT classes, taking tests, applying for college, and applying for financial aid do not describe PSJA's processes and outcomes.



From the beginning of Dr. King's leadership, making college accessible at the high school level was a key conscious decision aimed at increasing expectations for all students and for all staff. PSJA has taken every opportunity to move that idea forward from forming PSJA's dropout recovery program, the College, Career & Technology Academy, which helps dropouts earn college credit as they finish their high school diploma to instituting one designated Early College High School that is serving as a model to be implemented at all PSJA high schools. It is all about college at PSJA.

PSJA's latest numbers show...

- 48% of PSJA graduates leave the district with some college hours.
- The class of 2013 included 100 students with an associate's degree or certification.
- The breakdown of the graduating class of 2018 is as follows:
  - 2,043 total graduates.
  - 1,964 graduates (96%) with a distinguished high school diploma compare to 76% state rate.
  - 58% of PSJA graduates leave the district with nine or more college hours.
  - 370 graduated (18%) with associate's degrees compared to the 0.08% state rate.

Based on its current successes, PSJA has set the following goals:

- By 2014, PSJA ISD projected that it would be able to graduate 250 students with an associate's degree.
- By 2014, PSJA's goal was to have 50% of comprehensive and special purpose high school students graduate with 12 or more college hours. Leaders hoped to increase this rate to 60% in 2015, 70% in 2016, 80% in 2017, and 90% in 2018.
- By 2014, PSJA's goal was to have 25% of students in dropout recovery and credit recovery campuses graduate with 12 or more college hours. Leaders hoped to increase this rate to 30% in 2015, 40% in 2016, 50% in 2017, and 60% in 2018.

**Through support from TG Public Benefit, IDRA designed the OurSchool portal ([www.idra.org/OurSchool](http://www.idra.org/OurSchool)) that communities and educators can use to look up campus and district outcomes, such as attrition numbers, college access and success data.**



# CRITICAL COMPONENTS

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Though it is tempting to look only at how PSJA's new leadership has changed the district for the better, it is equally important to study PSJA's successes from multiple angles and to acknowledge that this success cannot be attributed to just one person, one program or one change. It is repeated by many in the district, there is no such thing as a silver bullet answer or a single solution that will improve the entirety of a school district and raise graduation rates, strengthen school holding power or achieve other outcomes.

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Systemic transformation is not about putting programs in place and getting everyone on the same page. It is about constantly re-evaluating what is happening in the district and its individual components and keeping the focus on improvement and the next steps. To put it another way, systemic transformation is a cycle that must feed into itself. The many moving parts that are put in motion to change the entire system must be monitored and revised when needed. As PSJA's public information officer, Arianna Vazquez-Hernandez states: "All of the plans and programs they have in place have some meaning. They are not going to just carry on with a program year after year because it is tradition or an easy solution." Any program that remains is sustained only because it works and is best for the district and its students.

Most importantly, the district leadership emphasizes that, when it comes to change in a district and the many ways to help foster success "the whole is greater than the sum of its parts." If another school district merely looks to the different components that PSJA uses without understanding the mindset and the complicated interrelated nature of the different parts in place, things may improve, but their level of success will not reach any substantial level.

In the Quality Schools Action Framework there are three components that can be summarized in the following way

1. Actionable data (student scores, college retention numbers) *must* be analyzed to identify problems and set goals.
2. Change must occur in the quality of the curriculum, teaching and how students and communities are engaged.
3. To make these changes, one must improve how schools work (school capacity building) and build coalitions with community members when necessary.

Each component helps to simplify how change can occur. It is important to realize that you cannot affect change across a district if you do not address, at the very least, curriculum and teaching. This must be emphasized because the following scenario can happen.

A school district attempts systemic transformation. Leaders begin addressing their dropout problem by starting an early college program for youth who are in at-risk situations. At the same time, they begin to offer dual credit classes for all students. Campus administrators, teachers and counselors are all enthusiastic about the change. Programs are implemented, and within a year it becomes obvious that little has changed. The reason is simple: challenges with integral parts of the system were not analyzed and were not addressed from the beginning. No changes took place in the curriculum, teaching quality was not addressed, and student engagement remained the same. School capacity building was not discussed since no critical components were analyzed.

The Quality Schools Action Framework will help to guide us in thinking how change can occur by teasing out the outcomes, indicators of change and the strategies as to how change occurs. It is a prescription for change. It *must* be noted that using the Quality Schools Action Framework without the intended vision of college readiness for all students will simply get you quality components with no direction. You can have the best curriculum, the best teachers and the best leadership, but if the vision is not shared by all players, nothing will change.

# ACTIONABLE KNOWLEDGE

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The first step that eventually led to PSJA's many changes was to identify major problems by looking at real numbers and to pinpoint which areas needed change. The most important areas were identified including the dropout population, graduation rates and academic achievement. The purpose for looking at internal data was it is, logically, the best place to start to truly grasp the issues in the district. Concerning school holding power, PSJA's dropout data were gleaned directly from the district's own calculations to avoid "artificial dropout reduction," which is most easily described as a reduction in the overall number of students dropping out of school in certain categories, such as home-school, left for home country, etc. Very often, dropout rates collected by the state reflect lower numbers than are the actuality. Dr. King had learned of this issue over time, and IDRA's work in particular helped to inform the difference between artificial dropout rates and the realistic number of students who are not completing their high school education. Above all, PSJA's superintendent did not want to repeat the mistakes of his predecessors. He wanted transparency in data and in every way that the district was going to be run. The only way to accomplish this was to be completely and totally honest about the data, regardless of how challenging the situation.

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In 2007, PSJA was losing about 500 students a year, only 966 students graduated out of a class that had about 1,600 students. These numbers were staggering and completely unacceptable. Many people advised that he drop the issue, but it was knowledge that could not be overlooked or forgotten. This had to be addressed. These data became the impetus for making dramatic changes in how PSJA recovered dropouts. It became the starting point for creating a dropout recovery school called the College, Career & Technology Academy, which gives students the opportunity to return to school to begin college rather than simply recovering credits or getting a GED. Taking an honest look at the data was exactly what set off changes at PSJA.

**Actionable data are what spur change at this district. Truthful information is not an enemy to public education; it is how we advocate for transformation.**

The drive for actionable and reliable data has remained strong in the district. It is how business is done. As part of the staff yearly gatherings, all available data are presented to all participants, and data analysis is encouraged to identify and acknowledge problems. As part of the district's "Countdown to Zero" efforts to recover *all* dropouts, accurate and ethical coding of a *dropout* is emphasized to staff. This is a simple admonition that data should be seen as a starting point to help students rather than be thought of as another way of making schools look bad. Stressing accurate and ethical coding is meant to remind staff that data are how to acknowledge there are challenges and to being looking for solution how to address them. It has been IDRA's experience that districts often diminish their shortcomings rather than being transparent about problems.

This is not the case at PSJA. Actionable data *are* what spur change at this district. Absolute dedication to the truth enabled Dr. King to make the case for deep and radical changes. Truthful information is not an enemy to public education, it is how we advocate for transformation.



## SCHOOL SYSTEM INDICATORS

Honestly reviewing actionable data allows for schools and communities to identify challenges and set goals. However, for systemic change to actually occur, educators—aided and supported by communities—must look at the individual factors that must be addressed in order for transformation to occur. Basically, what must we change and how will we know it needs to change?

A school system has a host of components that affect how well it prepares students, among the most important are *curriculum quality and access, teaching quality, student engagement, and parent involvement and community engagement*. These are places where educational leaders can make changes that will substantially affect outcomes. As you review this summary of where change must occur be aware that what you are seeing is informed by the changes that were made by PSJA's leadership independently of the Quality Schools Action Framework. However, as you will see, the alignment is clear.

## VISION — CHANGE WITH A PURPOSE

It is vital to understand that all changes to curriculum, teaching, student and family engagement *must* be made with the singular mission of preparing all students for college. A district can superficially improve on many of these indicators and still not have the desired outcomes because changes are not made with a concerted purpose and a single-minded vision.

People may think you are a crazy optimist, unrealistic and well-intended, but the truth is that all of this is possible.

## CURRICULUM QUALITY AND ACCESS

At minimum, curriculum quality and access refers to the diploma plans, educational programs for specific populations (English language learners, etc.), materials and other resources, such as technology, and their accessibility to all students. Simply, is the school preparing all students for college? Is college-readiness *the* driving force behind how curriculum is provided.

Things to look for...

- Does the default school curriculum, recommended for all students, satisfy minimum college entrance requirements?
- Are dual credit courses available for all students?
- How many students are earning college credit while still in high school?
- Does the default graduation plan satisfy requirements for college entrance programs like Texas' Top 10 Percent Plan?

Parent  
Involvement/  
Community  
Engagement

Student  
Engagement

Teaching  
Quality

Curriculum  
Quality and  
Access

# CURRICULUM QUALITY AND ACCESS

Curriculum in this context can mean an educational framework or the classes required for graduation. Both are important, but changes to curriculum must point to higher expectations for all students. At PSJA, three changes can be observed that all point to a coherent set of high expectations for all students.

- The default curriculum for graduation for all students satisfies the minimum requirements to enter any four-year state university. Ninety-five percent of students are on the default or distinguished (honors) curriculum. The state average ranges from 60% to 77% of students, depending on the region. Only students with severe disabilities or extreme circumstances are allowed to take anything less than what is required by colleges.
- Dual credit classes are available for all students early in their high school career. Dual credit classes allow students to take classes that satisfy high school graduation requirements while earning college credit. Dual credit classes were once only reserved for honor's students. At PSJA, students in at-risk situations, students who have dropped out, average students and honors students are all eligible to take dual-credit classes.
- A coherent educational curricular framework is used consistently across all grade levels and campuses. Students know what to expect anywhere they go in the district. Currently, all PSJA teachers are expected to teach using a tool that has been adopted by the district that engages all students to become active learners.

## High Expectations

The district has clearly made progress toward student achievement beyond the minimum requirements set by the state. PSJA students are putting in greater effort and achieving notable academic completion. The early college director of one high school states that only 5% of PSJA students graduate with the “minimum” diploma, and those students are considered to be the toughest cases. Yet, even these students must constantly work with faculty to complete the highest level requirements possible. The other students graduate with the “recommended” or “distinguished” high school diploma plans in contrast to the rest of the state.

**At PSJA, the default curriculum for graduation for all students satisfies the minimum requirements to enter any four-year state university.**

Note that PSJA's default curriculum, in Texas, is called the “4-by-4”, meaning that students must take four years each of math, English language arts, science, and social studies. In math, this means that students must take Algebra I, geometry, Algebra II, college algebra or pre-calculus. Remember that 95% of PSJA students are on this path. Elsewhere, it is the traditional path reserved for the “college bound.” At PSJA, truly, no one is left behind.

There is no reason for this not to be the default curriculum across the state as it had been. Yet, the Texas legislature and the State Board of Education in 2013 began taking steps to remove requirements for advanced classes, such as Algebra II, for all but “the college bound” students, because “not everyone is college material.” Here is an example of where, in spite of evidence to the contrary, the state is turning its backs on our students.

Unfortunately, state law is not the only barrier to implementing a successful quality curriculum. It is the practice of many schools to set policies that discourage or prevent students from taking a college bound curriculum. Some districts, for example, use standardized test scores, such as state assessments, to decide whether a student can take courses like Algebra II. In effect, even if a student has passed the Algebra I or geometry course, he or she may be denied enrollment into Algebra II and is forced into Fundamentals of Math courses, which do not satisfy college requirements.





Photo by PSJA ISD

This is clear evidence that such districts do not really value all students as college material and have chosen to take a low road to simply get students “on the stage” to graduate high school. PSJA has proven that a district can hold higher aspirations than just graduation or test scores. All their policies and procedures point to a system that values all students.

### **Coherent Practices**

Currently, PSJA’s curricular framework is based partially on Jobs for the Future’s “Common Instructional Framework.” The district has however repurposed the framework as six strategies for learning and renamed it, the Common Learning Framework, to emphasize the difference between teachers giving guidance to passive, potentially unengaged students and the responsibility that students in the district have for participating in their own education and motivating their own learning.

The six strategies are even being introduced into lower grades to hold the entire district to the same educational standard. It must be acknowledged that any framework, curriculum, learning guide, or teaching aid is just that. While the curricula are a large part of students being successful in primary and secondary school in addition to preparing them for college, they are somewhat transient tools that cannot be considered the solution to any one problem. For example, the Common Instructional Framework is what PSJA is using and adapting now because the teachers and administrators think that it engages students in critical thinking, but approaches to student engagement may evolve over time.

Our collective ideas about education have shifted over time and will continue to do so, which is why it is vital for educators to remain current so that they will give their students the best possible chance at academic success. By the same token, district leadership acknowledges that any curricular framework, no matter how brilliant, is only one tool among many others available to engage their students.

The importance of curricular frameworks cannot be minimized, but it is also problematic to conclude that there is a way to “buy” the solution to engaging students through the curriculum. Simply, curricular practices or methods must come with other actions, such as what PSJA took in raising expectations for all through their insistence on having almost all students take classes that satisfy college requirements.

# TEACHING QUALITY

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PSJA supports its educators in many ways and, in turn, the district's administrators expect great things from their teachers. But beginning any foray into improving teaching quality requires hiring teachers who are not only smart and qualified to teach their subjects, but who also believe in PSJA's vision and mission and are able to collaborate with their colleagues to improve their skills in the classroom. This was not always the case at PSJA.

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In 2007, many of the teachers teaching AP level courses were not qualified to teach them, and the preferred requirement that they are able to teach college-level classes was not occurring in the district. This was remedied by providing further educational opportunities to get the teachers certified and ensure that any future hires who were going to teach AP classes were both qualified concerning the high school curriculum and certified to be teaching at the college level.

This renewed focus on improving teaching quality was an important step as it would take hiring highly qualified instructors across the entire district in order to offer the kind of curriculum previously discussed. Many changes would not even be able to take place without addressing teaching quality. For example, it would be impossible to offer dual credit classes without having teachers with master's degrees.

To be sure, these are important changes. Just as important, PSJA's educators fully believe that they can help their students succeed because they have a mission, a vision, a plan, educational approaches and supportive tools to help them along the way. It all started with a change in focus from the helplessness that Dr. King describes coming from blaming the student and his or her circumstances rather than a focus on how the school, the staff and the district can change what they do to meet the student's needs regardless of the student's background. Changing teaching quality had to include changing the institution's attitude about how best to adapt to serving the young men and women in the district and the knowledge that it is the district and all of its members' responsibility to ensure that student needs and interests are being met to keep them engaged and believing in the academic process and their own potential.

It does bear to note that there are practices PSJA follows that have greatly enhanced their impact. These mostly deal with how teachers continually look to improve their teaching practices.

First, PSJA instructors must consult with one another and collaborate to foster innovation and to ensure that every educator is speaking the same language and providing coherent instruction to all students. This means that no teacher is an island. All teachers, for example, in a department or grade level must absolutely work together and know what instructors are doing in other grade levels and disciplines. This ensures coherence across the district. As one educator eloquently stated, CCTA's teachers all live by the words "be worthy of replication." CCTA's employees remain fully aware that they are the model for PSJA and other districts about how to effectively support and teach a special population of students and help them to succeed in college and highly skilled careers.

And second, PSJA instructors must learn from each other in a structured and efficient way. PSJA educators learn from each other by using *instructional rounds*. Instructional rounds are similar to doctor's rounds as exercises in creative problem-solving and sharing knowledge. A CCTA teacher, for example, will host a number of his or her colleagues and ask an important learning question. The question can be as simple as figuring out the best way to engage the students or to encourage collaboration. Other teachers will engage with the host and provide a number of different lenses and new perspectives about how best to answer the question so that every party involved has something to take away to their own students and curriculum. Instructors can then visit and observe each other, return to the group and further discuss what was learned. The end result is to improve the teaching methods of every instructor and to add more cohesion and consistency across the district.



# STUDENT ENGAGEMENT

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At PSJA, the duty of everyone is to understand students, especially the ones who struggle with academics or outside issues, and to meet their needs. In other words, the institution meets students where they are rather than sorting them and trying to force them into a mold that may or may not be appropriate. Relevance to college and the workforce are stressed as excellent motivators for getting students actively engaged with their education. The ones who do not see the value of academics on their own need to be reassured that there is a real point to what they are doing in school and that a skilled, rewarding career that can be at the end of the path. That is how students are engaged at PSJA.

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Achievement for all students, even ones with difficult backgrounds or special needs can be attributed to “meeting students where they are,” which is PSJA’s overall philosophy for how best to approach the relationship between the district and the student. This philosophy is about walking the talk and not merely thinking that it would be wonderful to make sure that every student succeeds but actually believing it by taking steps to make sure that the district does all it can to serve its students. This can be as simple as the following scenario.

In ninth grade, a student with below average math skills shows interest in becoming a doctor. Rather, than discouraging her, PSJA’s response is to bolster this desire and guide her to all the possible help necessary to gain the necessary math skills. If however, a student, late in his high school career, shows the same interest in becoming a doctor but does not have the grades, he is shown different pathways to the same goal, such as a two-year community college experience to improve skills and transfer to a four-year institution for a pre-med degree or if financial concerns are deep, following a two-year nursing degree plan with the understanding that this is a stepping stone to their ultimate dream. Never in the process is a student told to forgo their dream.

This is described by the leadership as “equity of opportunity” or enabling every student the chance to get an education that will lead to a more fulfilling career rather than a dead-end job. It is about helping students make their own way toward achieving their goals and allowing them to have a personal, deeper understanding and understand that college is not only for students who get straight A’s.

This is at the heart of PSJA’s student engagement: a deep belief in equity of opportunity.

**THE SCHOOL DISTRICT MEETS STUDENTS  
WHERE THEY ARE RATHER THAN SORTING THEM AND TRYING TO  
FORCE THEM INTO A MOLD THAT MAY OR MAY NOT BE APPROPRIATE.**

# CHANGE STRATEGIES

Up to this point, one can clearly see a pattern emerge in PSJA's practices that is aligned with the Quality Schools Action Framework.

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### Actionable Data:

District leadership reviews trends in dropout and student achievement data.

### School System Indicators:

Change occurs in...

**Curriculum Quality and Access**—99% of students are expected to be enrolled in a college bound curriculum; curriculum practices change toward a more coherent, highly engaging pedagogy.

**Quality Teaching**—Hiring and professional development practices change to accommodate curriculum policy.

**Student Engagement**—The idea that all students can be college and career ready becomes policy and practice.

The next section deals with *change strategies*. Here is where we will examine *how* change occurs. Note that in reviewing PSJA's transformation through the Quality School Action Framework, changes sometimes appear to have followed a straight line, but, in practice, indicators may have been addressed immediately, some over time and some continuously. The point is that issues in curriculum, teaching and student engagement were addressed and not overlooked as vital parts of the puzzle. Furthermore, PSJA did not simply make gradual changes, in some instances, changes occurred rapidly, such as the CCTA. We will examine next how these changes took place through school capacity building and coalition building.

**School capacity building** is defined as any initiative, program or effort designed to improve how schools serve students. This can take the form of professional development, student support services, or even complete restructuring of a campus to answer a specific educational need. Often when principals, community leaders and universities look toward school improvement, professional development, on any number of educational issues, is the first solution attempted at a campus level. There is a definite need for professional development, but if data are telling us that our students are dropping at alarming levels, there is need for other school capacity building measures beyond professional development possibly including providing extra resources.

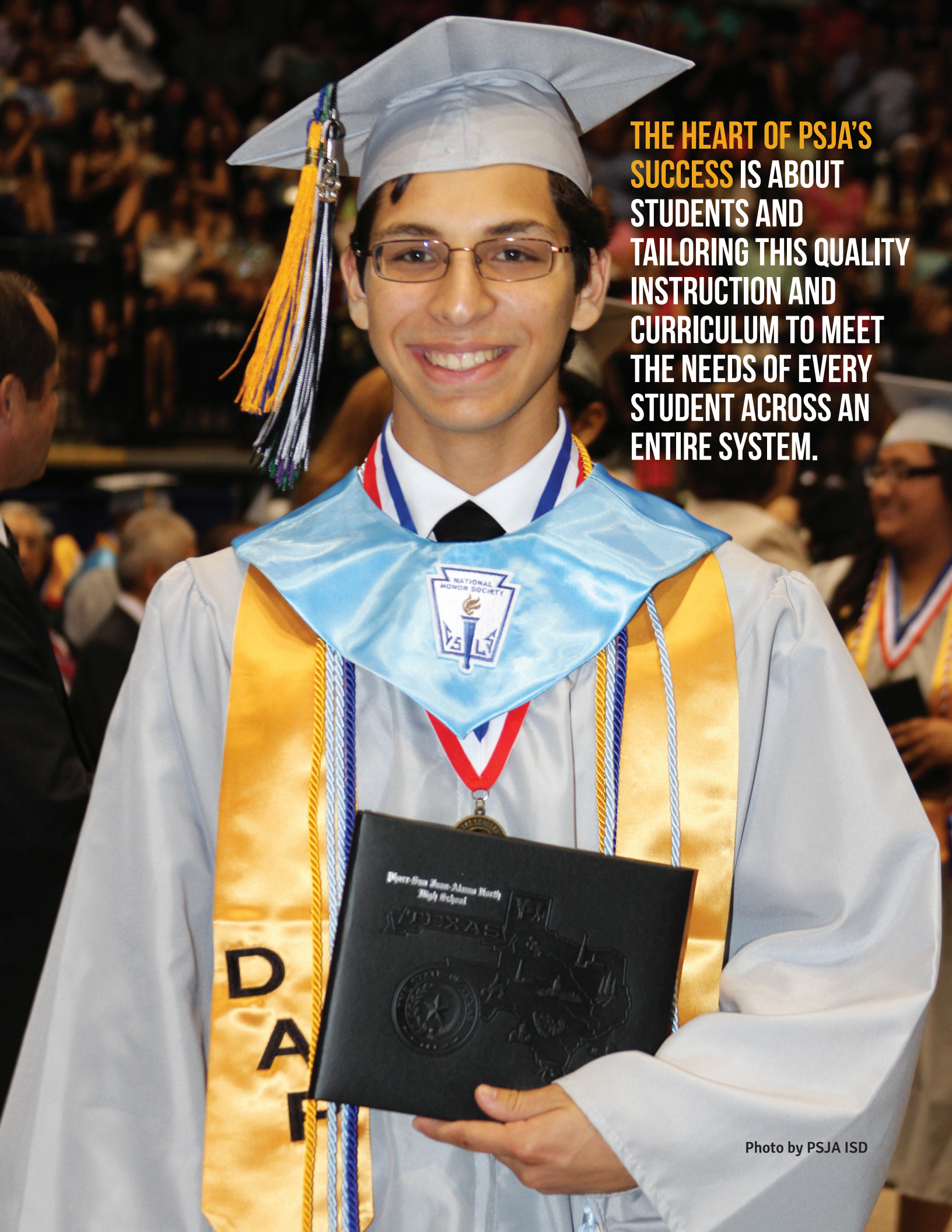
**Coalition building** refers to building strategic alliances between cross-sector stakeholders – such as institutions of higher education, business leaders, community-based organizations and policymakers – for the purpose of improving educational outcomes. These alliances can be as simple as formal and informal gatherings to share information to formal agreements concerning curriculum, teaching quality and equitable funding issues.

## School Capacity Building through Professional Development

Professional development for teachers and campuses has been a staple of school capacity building efforts for decades. It is a process of constant learning and keeping up with the most current research on best teaching practices. Yet, unfortunately, without a single unique vision and consistent implementation, professional development can turn into a flurry of ideas that come at educational professionals with nothing tying them together. This is where PSJA has made great strides. It bears repeating that this is part of a whole of systems. Educational leaders must acknowledge that fact as they prepare to implement changes. It is not enough to train teachers; other actions must take place.

All professional development at PSJA shares the following characteristics: (1) it serves the goal of college readiness; (2) it is coherent and consistent across the entire district; and (3) its implementation is fully supported by leadership at all levels. The end result is to improve the teaching methods of every instructor and to add more cohesion and consistency to whatever method is being used to teach students across campuses throughout the district. The learning and the transition from grade level to grade level and from





**THE HEART OF PSJA'S SUCCESS IS ABOUT STUDENTS AND TAILORING THIS QUALITY INSTRUCTION AND CURRICULUM TO MEET THE NEEDS OF EVERY STUDENT ACROSS AN ENTIRE SYSTEM.**

Photo by PSJA ISD



school to school must be consistent. Student expectations for learning and excellence also must be stable as the students move to more advanced levels and as they change schools. It is important that PSJA works to ensure that teachers share the same strategies and pedagogy.

As previously stated, professional development is often a hodge podge of many different techniques with no unifying vision. Dr. King stated that, though PSJA appreciates the many different learning and teaching tools they have been able to afford and integrate into the district, he fully realizes that there is no way to “buy” the solution that will give every student a good education. Over time, ideas about how to best educate students will continue to evolve and change, and many different instructional frameworks and curriculum will come and go. They are important, but the heart of PSJA’s success is about students and tailoring this quality instruction and curriculum to meet the needs of every student across an entire system.

Currently, all teachers have been trained on a system mentioned above called the “Common Instructional Framework,” which consists of six particular strategies that are designed to foster student engagement and cast learners as active participants in the classroom rather than passive recipients of the lessons they are being taught. Collaboration and critical, active thinking are vital to the framework, and PSJA has integrated this learning and teaching model in all of its classrooms. In addition, teachers are constantly tailoring their lessons to meet the needs of their individual students. It is a simple but powerful idea, be consistent across all levels and campuses so that instruction is stable and coherent. This notion is based on the assumption that the entire system must respond to the needs of students. As with most of PSJA’s efforts, it is asset based and looks toward the students as an active participant in their learning. It bears repeating that there is no single program, professional development model or curriculum framework that yields systemic reform. What lies behind PSJA’s success is that change must be systemic and serve the common goal of college success.

## STUDENTS at the dropout recovery campus (CCTA) are treated like gifted and talented students.

### **School Capacity Building through Support Services**

The support services offered in the district provide yet another way to build capacity. There are quite a few services offered at PSJA ranging from online services, tutoring and community computer buses that take computers to neighborhoods. But in the context of its college-going work, one program stands a ground breaking innovation: the transition specialists program.

PSJA’s transition specialists are PSJA counselors who work out of South Texas College and the University of Texas at Pan American and are there to serve PSJA graduates as they transition to higher education. These specialists spend part of their day on the college campus to field calls and meet with students who either walk in and or have regularly scheduled appointments. They also spend part of their day visiting the high schools to connect with the students there and give presentations, provide information to graduating seniors, and be ready and willing to help them transition to college.

Aside from promotion and making themselves known to the entire district, most of the transition counselors’ time is spent helping students with financial aid, registration, testing, degree plans, and offering them support and advice about their academic lives to build their confidence and help reduce their stress or anxiety about college classes or processes. The counselors have a stellar reputation with the students who see them that even students who are not from the PSJA district have requested their help.

PSJA’s transition specialists are an excellent capacity building part of the district because they serve as a bridge between the high schools and institutions of higher education. Because PSJA serves a mostly economically disadvantaged population where a great deal of the students are first-time college students who also are likely to be the first person in their family to attend college, the transition specialists are even more vital to the mission of the district because they help parents and students navigate the paperwork and prerequisites that are a confusing hurdle to entering and paying for college.

### **School Capacity Building through the CCTA and the Early College High School**

#### **Two schools, One Goal**

In this section we will look how school capacity building took a completely radical route to actually build two schools for specific educational purposes that are affecting the entire district. First, there is the College, Career & Technology Academy, PSJA’s “dropout” campus that has garnered much attention across the state and nation, since it treats its students completely differently than the typical dropout recovery school. Then there is PSJA Thomas Jefferson T-STEM Early College High School, a school that by the sound of its name appears to be serving the elite at PSJA. Both schools defy expectations and are excellent example of school capacity building on large scale.



**College, Career & Technology Academy—A Different Experience.** A well-known part component of PSJA's transformation is the College, Career & Technology Academy (CCTA), a special-purpose campus that specifically targets and helps students who did not complete high school. CCTA is the “back on track campus” that treats students like gifted and talented men and women rather than problems that need to be dealt with punitively for not being able to complete high school. Engaging the students in their learning and helping them to take charge of their lives to improve their future is at the core of CCTA's mission.

As students walk in the door, they are greeted: “You didn't finish high school. Start college today!” Orientation at CCTA is often an emotional moment because students fully realize they are there to learn and to participate and not merely to be funneled out the door as has so often been the case in their lives. What is expected of them at CCTA is a definite departure from the past. The orientation process informs students of the skills they will need to develop to be successful at CCTA, in college and in their eventual careers. They also are encouraged to prioritize attendance and be fully aware of the steps they need to take to graduate, including the importance of attending tutoring sessions if need be. For these students, very often, it is the first time they have felt welcome and part of a school. This is not the typical credit recovery campus where students sit drone-like for hours behind a computer. CCTA tell students, “You can do this, and we will help you.”

Students at CCTA are treated like gifted and talented students. Their tasks are not watered-down skill sheets to pass tests. Their tasks are complex project, collaborative works, lively and engaging group discussions, and reading circle—all things you would expect from GT students. At CCTA, instructors spend a large amount of their time in professional development and in collaboration with other teachers to prepare this engaging learning environment. Students at CCTA are gifted because they are treated as such.

**CCTA Results.** The CCTA's success has been well documented since its opening in 2007. The most recent numbers are from the fall 2012 semester when about 50% of the students were in dual enrollment and taking credited college classes. This is aligned with the overall district's improved graduation rate that rose from 62% to 88% between 2007 and 2012, respectively. Anywhere from 180 to 213 students enter the campus each year. CCTA's graduation rates are notable, especially for such a relatively small, special-purpose campus. Since its inception in 2008, 1,189 students have graduated, 289 of whom were age 21 and over. Clearly, they were able to make success happen and take a vital step toward further education and skill-building with the support of CCTA's administrators, teachers and staff. The fact that half of CCTA's students are enrolled in credited, non-developmental, college classes is a sign of its success. It proves that going beyond what other districts have done with their dropout students will not only be successful as proven by the increasing the rate of graduates from all PSJA high schools and from CCTA but also that students who other educators might have given up on are just as capable of going to college as top 10% students.

**THE DISTRICT** has doubled the number of graduates, halved the dropout rate, and increased college-going rates.

**The T-STEM Early College High School.** Change at PSJA began by treating students that the system often overlooks as college material. Change began to take place across all of PSJA as the leadership decided to make high school “more like college.” In a school district made up of students who many people consider too poor to learn, at best, or at worst, unteachable, incredible changes have been made. The results, as we've noted, speak for themselves, with over half of PSJA students earning college credit.

However, never satisfied with their success, PSJA embarked on building yet another school from scratch. After seeing their success with the general comprehensive high school, PSJA leaders decided to start an early college high school, not as an exclusive magnet school, but as a lab to learn how to more strategically scale up the idea. It was not enough to transform district practices and value students by treating them like college students. At the ECHS, all students will graduate from high school with the “distinguished achievement” curricula and, most importantly, earn two years of college credit or an actual associate's degree.

The ECHS is not, a magnet school. Any student can attend as a way to invest in an exclusive cadre of students—A defector honor's program. What the ECHS is intended to be is where PSJA will further refine how to make high schools more like college. It is where the district's ultimate dreams go to become a reality for all students. This is PSJA's latest innovation, and one with very high goals. Currently, PSJA has already graduated 100 students with an associate's degree. The goal is that by 2015, in two years' time, as they begin to scale up this intensive program to the rest of the district, 500 students will graduate with an associate's degree. If the numbers continue their steady climb and systemic transformation continues, there is little evidence that this goal will not be reached.

# COALITION BUILDING

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One of the most remarkable aspects of PSJA's transformation is the emphasis on making high school more like college through academic rigor and dual credit enrollment opportunities for all students. Like everything else in systemic transformation, this requires a substantial amount of work and planning. And possibly the most central is building a partnership with local community colleges. There are many questions and possible pitfalls when attempting to scale up dual credit classes, and coalition building is the only way to fully address them,

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The following questions arise when proposing a similar scale-up of dual credit enrollment.

- Who will teach these classes and where?
- What steps need to be taken to prepare students for college course placement exams that routinely keep students in remedial classes?
- What transportation issues need to be taken care of?
- Can any prerequisites be waived for students finishing high school and earning college credit?
- What privacy and data concerns need to be considered when sharing data between high schools and colleges? Are there problems with sharing individual student data from institution to institution?

At PSJA, the closest higher education institutions are South Texas College and University of Texas at Pan American. From the very beginning of offering dual credit classes to “dropouts” at the College, Career & Technology Academy, leadership at the highest levels met to plan and begin the process. The details of such an endeavor have the potential to derail efforts if not well delineated from the beginning. It is essential that both parties always clarify purposes and processes as they build relationships. Memoranda of agreement and other documents will assist in outlining goals, responsibilities and expectation for both parties. It is extremely rare in education for partnerships like the one built by PSJA, STC and UTPA to exist, much less flourish. But that is exactly what has occurred, a partnership that began as an experiment in increasing school holding power now affects an entire school system. The lines between high school and college have truly blurred for all students at PSJA.

**A PARTNERSHIP**  
that began as an experiment in increasing school holding power now affects an  
**entire school system.**



# ENGAGED CITIZENS

## A Key Lever of Change

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Throughout this document, we have outlined how PSJA has transformed itself and how these changes are aligned with IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework. This alignment has served to organize ideas around school transformation to point out that, among the many of school improvement efforts PSJA is addressing, multiple factors are simultaneously implemented instead of prescribing an ineffective silver bullet approach. The Quality Schools Action Framework also has helped to demonstrate that every change considered at PSJA is an internal systemic one. At no point do external factors play a role in changing expectations for students or the quality of educational excellence expected from staff. No one ever exclaims, "We can't do that because our students are too poor and their parents are ill equipped to help their students." No one. This is a conscious choice by the leadership at PSJA to affect change over what it can control: itself. This is a powerful choice and one that should be taken to heart by educators and policymakers across the state and country. It is a simple message: "Change the system, and make no excuses by pointing to problems outside of our schools." No matter how well intentioned people are in explaining low performance because of poverty, it is demeaning to the working poor who struggle to survive and is simply wrong. PSJA has proven that.

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Yet, where do families, parents and the community play a role in all of this change? It is IDRA's contention that families are key to change in places where change is not occurring and vital to sustaining positive change in places like PSJA where transformation is occurring. In the lever of change section of the Quality Schools Action Framework, you will see three key components: *accountable leadership*, *enlightened public policy*, and *engaged citizens*. This publication has primarily shown how accountable leadership at PSJA has been a key lever of change. Most change has flowed from leadership at the district level. It is the leadership that viewed the data, built capacity at the school level, built coalitions, and affected change in curricula, teaching quality, student engagement and community engagement. Families and communities are the engaged citizens part of this framework, and their role was not emphasized in this document since this story has been told in the context of the district changing itself.

At PSJA, the story of how families are being involved to sustain change is a story that is still being written. In the Rio Grande Valley, IDRA is involved in the creation of another groundbreaking experiment that carries with it the potential to change schools and districts all over the state: the PTA Comunitario. The PTA Comunitario is a community parent teacher association that is not based in a single school but within a community-based organization. The first PTA Comunitario was begun by a non-proselytizing, faith-based group made up of immigrant women, called ARISE, A Resource in Serving Equity.<sup>5</sup> This organization helps empower community women to take up challenges seen in their highly economically distressed communities. Often in groups of dozens, sometimes hundreds, ARISE marshals resources for voting and information campaigns to raise awareness on infrastructure issues in the area. One of their main concerns has been education and how students from poor areas are often ignored and looked over as worthy of going to college. Since the organization is not geographically bound, its members are served by many different school districts. Seizing on the opportunity to state their concerns and make their case ARISE's PTA Comunitario has been forging relationships with school districts in the area, namely PSJA and Donna ISD.

In 2010, ARISE invited Dr. King to one of their meetings that are held homes in some of the poorest neighborhoods in the country. This was a momentous occasion for all participants as it began a series of collaborative efforts that are taking place, such as ESL classes being held at ARISE centers and the formation of more PTA Comunitarios in the PSJA boundaries. How does any of this play a role in PSJA's transformation? It is vital to the longevity and sustainability of its successes.



**A simple message:  
“Change the system,  
and make no excuses by  
pointing to problems  
outside of our schools.”**

Too often, the quality of education a school district has to offer lies solely in the leadership. If a leader or a leadership team makes positive visionary changes as has been done at PSJA, what happens in the absence of that leadership? In most situations, a different leader comes in with a different agenda and changes everything, often undoing years of hard work. This is a concern to many of us who study and observe schools transforming themselves. How will they sustain success beyond the tenure of an effective leader? The answer must lie in our families and communities.

Families and communities that have been part of decisions and initiatives, and who have first-hand accounts of positive change will become the systems most vocal advocates. It is for this reason that districts like PSJA do well in engaging communities, actively and authentically, by being transparent, by participating in community-based organization

initiatives, by treating all students equally and by simply behaving like community members and not bureaucratic drones. If, for whatever reason, leadership changes or success is no longer occurring, families will come to collaborate and actively advocate for more resources or even better leaders. Families will be an ally in sustaining change, but they must be engaged with dignity and integrity as has been the case in PSJA.

But what if nothing is happening at your district, what if the messages are negative, the expectations low and the successes meager? What if your school district does not believe that all students should be prepared for college? What if those dreams are reserved for an elite few?

At the point, you must become one of these “engaged citizens.” You must take up the call. Analyze your school’s data via IDRA’s OurSchool Portal<sup>6</sup> (for Texas), form your own parent organization, engage your school and district by asking about scores and college-going rates at school board meetings. You are within your rights to do so. Approach your school and ask, “Why aren’t more kids going to college from our schools?” Become that advocate, be engaged. Ask to collaborate with schools, ask to see more data if you think it necessary. Form your own PTA Comunitario as many are doing in South Texas. Like them, hold school boards and superintendents to high standards for all children. Ask to monitor the number of students who are graduating college ready. Form committees to monitor all success data. Hold the system accountable, at a time when the nation seems ready to give up on our students.

**And if at any time you are told: “That is unrealistic. You’re dreaming. Not every student needs college and not every student is capable of that kind of rigor.” Simply say point to this publication and declare: “That is not true. It is happening every day in South Texas.”**





## ABOUT IDRA

The Intercultural Development Research Association is an independent, non-profit organization that is dedicated to assuring educational opportunity for every child. We are committed to the IDRA valuing philosophy, respecting the knowledge and skills of the individuals we work with and build on the strengths of the students and parents in their schools.

At IDRA, we develop innovative research- and experience-based solutions and policies to assure that (1) all students have access to and succeed in high quality schools, (2) families and communities have a voice in transforming the educational institutions that serve their children, and (3) educators have access to integrated professional development that helps to solve problems, create solutions, and use best practices to educate all students to high standards.

To learn more about IDRA's Quality Schools Action Framework™, visit [www.idra.org](http://www.idra.org) or read our book *Courage to Connect: A Quality Schools Action Framework* ([www.idra.org/couragetconnect](http://www.idra.org/couragetconnect)).

More information about IDRA's PTA Comunitario model is online at [www.idra.org/IDRA\\_Family\\_Center/PTA\\_Comunitario](http://www.idra.org/IDRA_Family_Center/PTA_Comunitario).

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<sup>1</sup>Johnson, R.L. *Texas Public School Attrition Study, 2012-13: Overall Attrition Rates Take Another Step Forward* (San Antonio: IDRA, October 2013).

<sup>2</sup>Robledo Montecel, M. "Early solutions can lower dropout rate," *San Antonio Express-News* (November 10, 2013).

<sup>3</sup>Robledo Montecel, M. (2013).

<sup>4</sup>Robledo Montecel, M., & C.L. Goodman (eds). *Courage to Connect: A Quality Schools Action Framework™* (San Antonio: IDRA, 2010).

<sup>5</sup>Montemayor, A.M. "ARISE South Tower PTA Comunitario—A New Model of Parent Engagement," *IDRA Newsletter* (April 2010).

<sup>5</sup>[www.idra.org/OurSchool](http://www.idra.org/OurSchool)



## COLLEGE BOUND & DETERMINED

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