

# **College and Career Readiness for All Texas High School Graduates**

---

**An Issue Brief Submitted  
to the Communities Foundation of Texas**

**By Jobs for the Future**

**March 29, 2009**



**JOBS FOR THE FUTURE**

88 Broad Street, 8<sup>th</sup> Floor  
Boston, MA 02110  
617.728.4446  
[www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)

# **College and Career Readiness for All Texas High School Graduates\***

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

This brief explains how Texas can implement a college-ready curriculum for all students, while preparing them for careers with advancement prospects and future academic success in two-year, four-year, and technical colleges. It shows how the state can endorse career and technical education (CTE) for high school students without embracing a two-tiered diploma system that sets lower expectations for one group of students and college-ready expectations for others.

To do so, we describe the educational model of Hidalgo Early College High School, a promising and potentially replicable example of how it is possible to wed the goals of college readiness with high-quality career and technology education. This school's adoption of an early college design in 2006, through the Texas High School Project, accelerated a more-than-decade-long effort by Hidalgo ISD to promote college and career readiness.

### **Most Hidalgo ISD students graduate, and they graduate college ready.**

- All but a few of Hidalgo ISD's students are Hispanic and of low socioeconomic status – groups that have historically achieved lower levels of educational attainment than peers statewide. Yet Hidalgo students graduate at high rates and rarely drop out; all but a few complete the state's college readiness curriculum, the Recommended High School Program. In 2007, every Hidalgo graduate completed the Recommended High School Program or Distinguished Achievement Program.

### **Hidalgo students have the opportunity to earn substantial college credit in CTE as well as core academic courses while completing the Recommended High School Program.**

- All ninth- and tenth-grade students take a focused college-prep academic core that includes college experiences for everyone.
- By eleventh grade, Hidalgo students can take college courses in general education or a variety of CTE pathways, including health, human services, and other skilled trades. These course offerings are provided through partnerships with South Texas College, Texas State Technical College, and the University of Texas Pan American – the first college partnership initiated under the early college grant overseen by the University of Texas System through the Texas High School Project.

### **Hidalgo's educational leaders emphasize that the district's efforts should be viewed as “emergent practices” rather than “best practices.” Yet early results are very promising.**

- Under current state policies and state support for college and career readiness, there is good reason to believe that Hidalgo's unique model of integrating high-quality, college-level CTE coursework with other college coursework will pay dividends for all its students.
- The state should continue to monitor and mine lessons from Hidalgo to understand implications for replication by other districts and colleges.

---

\* The text here is adapted with minor changes from written testimony submitted to the Texas Senate and House committees on education regarding SB3/HB3 by Texas High School Project Executive Director John Fitzpatrick.

## College and Career Readiness for All Texas High School Graduates

Texas is a national leader in taking steps to ensure that more young people graduate high school prepared for postsecondary success. Policymakers understand that securing the state's economic future rests on the ability of its workforce to do jobs that increasingly require a postsecondary credential or degree. These are the same jobs that will help more of its workers earn wages that can support a family.<sup>1</sup>

However laudable the state's explicit goal of "college readiness for all," it has also raised legitimate concerns among state policymakers. Can schools implement a college-ready curriculum for all students, while also preparing those who will enter the labor market right after high school for careers with good pay and advancement prospects? Can schools prepare these students for further education should they choose to return to college later? Can the state endorse career and technical education (CTE) for high school students without embracing a two-tiered diploma system that sets lower expectations for one group of students and college-ready expectations for others?

Two key Texas policies and practices can help reconcile these apparently competing goals: First, the state has committed resources to preparing all students for non-remedial college coursework – both technical and academic. Second, it has initiated innovations that support high school students to complete planned sequences of college courses by graduation - a practice made possible by a robust state dual enrollment policy. This means that schools can design pathways that prepare all students for college and ensure that those who enter the workforce right after high school have already attained critical postsecondary training and certification.

National evidence is emerging about the benefits of providing CTE and general education college courses to high school students. Research by the Community College Research Center in 2007 examined dual enrollment participant outcomes from two large-scale programs in Florida and New York.<sup>2</sup> Compared to non-participants with similar academic and social backgrounds, dual enrollees who took CTE and other college courses were more likely to graduate high school and be prepared for college. Those who enrolled in college had greater initial persistence rates and higher GPAs than non-participants.

This brief illustrates how such outcomes and practices are possible in Texas. It describes how one Texas high school uses the state's policies and local partnerships to help ensure all students can graduate ready for college, completing key postsecondary courses and certification by graduation. Hidalgo Early College High School, a school recognized for raising the academic achievement of

### Examples of Texas Policies Promoting Postsecondary Success

- Passage of House Bill 1 in 2006, a major bill designed to raise college readiness rates. It includes a \$275 per-student allotment for high schools to support individual achievement of college-ready standards.
- Investment since 2003 in an aggressive high school redesign and reform effort through the Texas High School Project, a \$260 million partnership with private philanthropies.
- Ongoing efforts to align high school curricula, standards, and assessments with the expectations for college credit-bearing coursework.

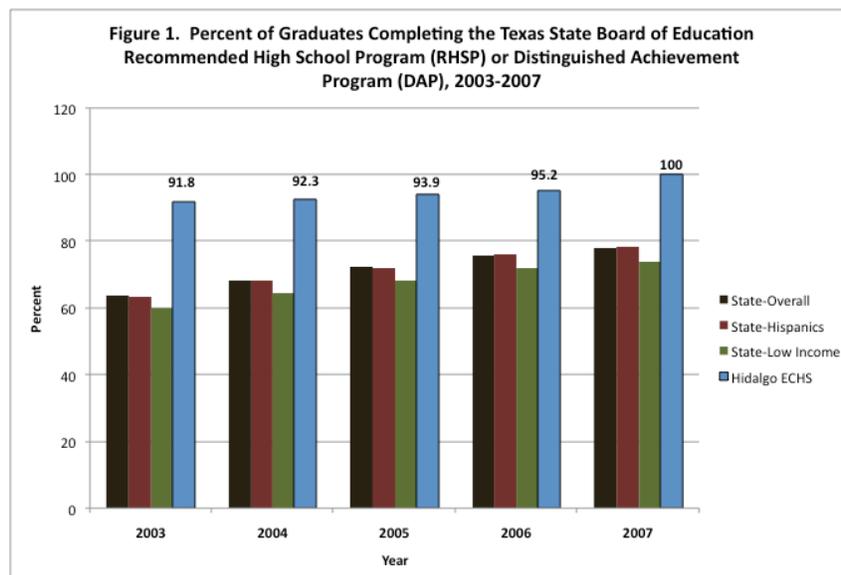
low-income Latino youth, is a promising, replicable example of how it is possible in Texas to wed the goals of college readiness with high-quality CTE-oriented training.

### Treasure on the Border: Hidalgo Independent School District<sup>3</sup>

Hidalgo Independent School District is a rural district serving a predominantly low-income (90.6 percent) and Hispanic (99.8 percent) population along the Mexican border. Hidalgo Early College High School (ECHS) is the sole comprehensive high school serving the district's students.<sup>4</sup> The student body is 64.8 percent "at-risk" of dropping out of high school, according to the criteria used in current Texas statute.<sup>5</sup> This includes English Language Learners, who account for 25 percent of the school's students.

Promoting college and career awareness and readiness have been priority goals for Hidalgo ISD for well over a decade. This commitment is yielding impressive results:

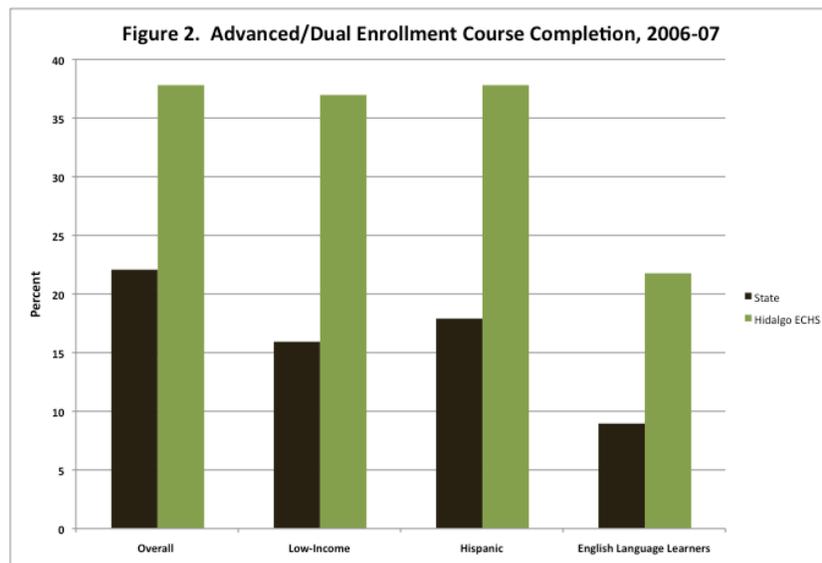
- *Hidalgo students graduate at high rates and rarely drop out* – The four-year cohort graduation rate for the Class of 2007 at Hidalgo ECHS was 88.7 percent, 10 percentage points higher than the state average. Approximately 10 percent of students were still enrolled in high school after four years, and less than 1 percent of the Class of 2007 dropped out of school.<sup>6</sup>
- *Hidalgo students complete more courses preparing them for college than other Texas high school students* – The percentage of students completing the Texas Recommended High School Program or the Distinguished Achievement Program has steadily improved and surpassed overall state rates and those for low-income and Hispanic students. In 2007, 100 percent of Hidalgo ECHS student completed these courses. (See Figure 1.)



In 2006, Hidalgo ISD accelerated its efforts to prepare all students for college and careers, transforming its high school into an early college school through support from the Texas High School Project. The goal of the early college school design is to enable students with traditionally low educational attainment to earn up to two years of transferrable college credit or an Associate's

degree by high school graduation. Under the early college grant, overseen by the Institute for Public School Initiatives at the University of Texas System, the University of Texas Pan American was the first college partner to be engaged. This partnership was soon complemented by partnerships with South Texas College and Texas State Technical College.

Coupled with state approval of a \$275 per-student college readiness allotment in the same year under HB 1 (see box, page 2), Hidalgo ramped up its college-level academic and CTE course offerings and increased support systems so that students could better prepare for these courses. In 2006-07, the proportion of students completing advanced/dual enrollment courses in Hidalgo Early College High School far exceeded overall state rates and rates for low-income, Hispanic, and English Language Learners. (See Figure 2.)



### **Hidalgo’s Commitment: College Readiness Leads to College Experiences for All**

What accounts for the success of Hidalgo’s students? District leaders are quick to remind that it took years of planning to build a solid foundation for providing early college coursework to all students. Indeed, district leaders make a point of calling the district an “Early College District.” Implicit in that term is an explicit commitment to designing educational experiences that answer the following critical question:

How do we do [early college] for all kids – even for the student ranked 187<sup>th</sup> out of 187 graduating seniors?

*– Hidalgo Assistant Superintendent for College Readiness and former principal of Hidalgo Early College High School*

The district’s success is a product of thoughtful design, strategic partnerships with three neighboring colleges, and a focus on college and careers by students, parents, and teachers from as early as elementary school.

### *Preparation for Early College Begins Early*

Preparing Hidalgo students for college begins early – in elementary school. Students’ strong performance and growth on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS) throughout the elementary and middle school years indicate that the district provides solid academic preparation for high school. In addition, elementary schools take pains to build awareness of college opportunities for their young students by decorating classrooms and hallways with college gear and pennants. This heightened level of college awareness continues in the middle school and high school, where college names are visible throughout the buildings.

At the middle school level, college exposure will be taken a step further. Beginning in fall 2009, the district will introduce pre-AP courses across various subject areas at each of the middle schools. College readiness efforts continue in Hidalgo up through entrance to high school. Each summer, incoming ninth graders attend a mandatory THEA Academy that provides four weeks of intensive academic preparation to help ease the transition to their freshman year at Hidalgo Early College High School.

Meanwhile, Hidalgo boasts remarkable parent engagement efforts. Families in this socioeconomically challenged community receive critical information about how to access a wide range of financial assistance, from government programs to college loans and scholarships for their children.<sup>7</sup>

### *Early Assessment for College-Level Work*

One of the goals of the summer program is to assess and prepare students for the Texas Higher Education Assessment (THEA) at the beginning of their first year in high school. In Texas and nationally, students typically do not take a college-readiness assessment until late in high school or upon entering college. By contrast, Hidalgo high school administrators, counselors, teachers, students, and families all know the skills entering students already possess and what assistance they will need to develop as they prepare for college during the next four years. At the culmination of middle school and beyond, THEA serves as a blueprint for addressing skills gaps and counseling students into early college experiences as they are ready.

### *The Design: Common Early College Prep with a Variety of Paths to Additional College Credit*

In addition to taking the Recommended High School Program, all Hidalgo students start high school by taking some basic college-level work. Meanwhile, Hidalgo high school students are reassessed regularly on the THEA to help determine course selection and scheduling as they proceed through high school, receiving THEA preparation and support throughout.

Freshmen and sophomores take introductory college classes in art or music appreciation, as well as other electives outside core college academics, from instructors certified by the district’s neighboring South Texas College. Students also take Advanced Placement courses, specifically in Spanish language and Spanish literature, to align with and leverage the Hidalgo community’s cultural and linguistic strengths.

By eleventh grade, Hidalgo students can take college courses in general education sequences or in CTE college course pathways open to students who are interested in immediate certification or the potential of pursuing an Associate of Applied Sciences degree. Just as with general education college

courses, Hidalgo students typically must pass a readiness standard for CTE courses, the entrance requirements for which vary by institution. There are some courses that do not require passing an assessment – critical options for students who are struggling academically so that they can continue to have postsecondary experiences while strengthening academic skills at the high school.

This design ensures that each student experiences a focused college-prep academic core and some college-level work in the ninth and tenth grades but can pursue a variety of paths to additional college credit by junior year of high school based on interest and preparation level. All juniors and seniors have the opportunity to decide the amount of college work and the type of fields of study they will pursue, with crucial assistance from high school counseling staff dedicated to help them explore college options.

#### *CTE Through College Partnerships Makes Possible Early College District Wide*

Combining all available resources and collaborating with college partners in three different local settings has allowed the district to realize its plan to provide every student with college access opportunities while still in high school. Of particular interest and significance is how Hidalgo Early College High School has actively included CTE college course offerings as integral to its design, utilizing local college partners to do so.

Not every one of Hidalgo’s eleventh graders is interested in or ready to begin the general education college coursework required for a Bachelor’s degree – options that are offered through the University of Texas Pan-American. Some of these students already work to support their families, and for the same reasons foresee entering the labor market, not college, upon high school graduation. Some do not meet UTPA’s prerequisite college readiness standards, which are higher than the state’s minimum college-readiness criteria under the Texas Success Initiative.

This spurred Hidalgo to create college course pathways that provide students with options for early college experiences, including CTE paths at South Texas College and Texas State Technical College. These strategic partnerships allow Hidalgo to use existing resources efficiently to reach the goal of “college for all.”

By strengthening these partnerships over the years, Hidalgo enables students to gain early access to meaningful CTE learning in a variety of pathways including, health, human services, and other skilled trades. At South Texas College students take CTE courses in automotive technology, electronics and computer science, HVAC (heating, ventilation, and air conditioning), and machining and metal trades certifications. At Texas State Technical College Harlingen, students take courses that guarantee immediate workplace entry in fields ranging from aviation maintenance to health careers (e.g., CNA, biomedical technician).

Meanwhile, these pathways leave doors open to further education. Many of the courses are articulated with other postsecondary systems in the state. Therefore, enrolling in and completing articulated coursework at these two colleges provides students with transferable credits in core academic requirements, as well as opportunities to complete Associate of Applied Sciences degrees in a wide array of viable “family-sustaining wage” CTE pathways.

## Certification Provides Some Students with Leg Up on College and Career

Hidalgo Early College High School students express enthusiasm about the array of postsecondary options available to them, including those that lead to certification. A number of Hidalgo students are enrolled in and completing certificate programs. (See Table 1.) Of students who enrolled in these programs in 2008, 83 percent earned a certificate.

**Table 1. Certificates Completed by Hidalgo Students in spring 2008**

<b>Program</b>	<b>Number of Certifications Issued</b>
Pharmacy Assistant Certificate	<b>5</b>
State Water Quality Monitor	<b>11</b>
Associate's Degree in Engineering	<b>3</b>
Precision Tool Manufacturing Technology	<b>6</b>
Database Programming SQL	<b>5</b>
Database Programming PL/SQL	<b>1</b>
Certified Nursing Assistant	<b>9</b>

Students and Hidalgo staff cite the importance of these options:

- Students are engaged in a meaningful postsecondary experience that culminates immediately in marketable national certification for high-demand work and entry to a career ladder.
- Students begin to identify themselves as not only postsecondary learners but also as fulfilling societal needs in the world of work outside of school - often through required internships.
- Student learning becomes real as they apply academic knowledge and technical skills to their work.
- Students learn from their inclusion in actual communities of practice that advancement is possible. The importance of this cannot be underestimated for young adults growing up in the socioeconomically challenged community of Hidalgo and other Texas towns in the Rio Grande Valley with tough economies.<sup>8</sup>

In these respects, the Certified Nursing Assistant program available to juniors and seniors in Hidalgo was mentioned frequently. Although CNA certification leads to entry-level positions in health care, many students use the program as a way to gain practical experience in the field to supplement their academics. Others who are anxious to work immediately are gaining a marketable skill while getting their foot in the door of health careers. Some students aspire to more postsecondary education in this field, taking courses in biomedical technology and kinesiology.

### **Added Benefit of CTE in Early College: Colleges are Equipped to Deliver Career and Technical Education Courses**

Using college courses to deliver CTE-oriented training to high school students has additional advantages. Texas community and technical colleges are positioned to adapt to the increasingly

complex and changing demands in career fields and offer an array of advanced training options. Partly because of long-standing involvement in Tech Prep and federally funded CTE initiatives, Texas community and technical colleges have a history of collaboration with industry representatives to realize a mission to serve both local and state economies. As a result, students are likely to have more access to advanced training options than a small district, like Hidalgo, could offer on its own.

Indeed, Hidalgo's partnering CTE early college programs at South Texas College and Texas State Technical College feature a robust array of high-tech equipment and industry-gear instruction serving young adults as well as older students who are returning to hone their skills in dedicated career training programs. School districts like Hidalgo obviously stand much to gain in efficiency through such partnerships: preparing students academically by using existing resources available at these colleges and realizing the goal of providing all students with a college experience.

### **Conclusions and Challenges**

Hidalgo's educational leaders are the first to admit that the district has not yet developed the ideal college preparation strategy and emphasize that their attempts should be viewed as "emergent practices," rather than "best practices." Indeed, results from the first cohort of students who were officially "early college" students cannot yet be definitively evaluated because the oldest are only in eleventh grade. However, early evidence is promising. In addition to the results shown above in Figures 1 and 2, 2008 data show that 97 percent of students are passing their college courses – with 63 percent receiving grades of A or B.

In addition, the continuing dedication of the district's educators to reflecting and improving upon innovative policies and practices is clear. One cannot underestimate the level of complex coordination and resources the district and college partners must have in order to deliver on their commitment that every high school student graduates, has completed some college, and is ready for further postsecondary education and family supporting work. Technical colleges rely on adequate funding to provide CTE programs that meet the state's charge of preparing workers to industry standards. The district has been able to innovate and help students be successful because of the state's investments in college and career readiness – including funding for high school redesign and \$275 per-student college-readiness allotment - and its favorable dual enrollment policies. State support has made a difference; any change in that commitment would have negative consequences on these positive efforts and curtail their expansion.

However, under current state conditions, there is good reason to believe that Hidalgo's unique model of integrating high-quality college-level CTE coursework with other college coursework will pay valuable dividends for students, their families, and the broader economy. The state should continue to monitor and mine lessons from Hidalgo to understand possibilities for replication by other districts and colleges. For the time being, it provides an early proof of concept for how it is possible in Texas to couple high-quality CTE programs with the goals of college readiness, thereby improving opportunities for future college success and greater potential for career advancement.

## Endnotes

1. See Bosworth, Brian, et al. 2007. *Adult Learners in Higher Education: Barriers to Success and Strategies to Improve Results*. Boston, MA: Jobs for the Future, p. 4: "... the three job categories projected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics to be among the 10 fastest-growing through 2014 (as measured by total number of new and vacant positions) and pay a median annual salary over \$29,000 (approximately the federal lower living standard income level for a family of four) all require postsecondary credentials (Hecker 2005). Similarly, 15 of the 20 occupations predicted to grow the fastest (in terms of percentage growth in new and vacant positions) require some form of postsecondary education, while nine require a Bachelor's degree or better. All 20 jobs expected to suffer the greatest decline in openings by 2014 require only on-the- job training (U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics 2005)."
2. Karp, Melinda Mechur, Juan Carlos Calcagno, Katherine L. Hughes, Dong Wook Jeong & Thomas R. Bailey. 2007. *The Postsecondary Achievement of Participants in Dual Enrollment: An Analysis of Student Outcomes in Two States*. St. Paul, MN: National Research Center for Career and Technical Education, University of Minnesota.
3. Information on Hidalgo ISD and the state of Texas were Texas Education Agency. Academic Excellence Indicator System Report, 2007-08, Retrieved March 3, 2009. <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/cgi/sas/broker>
4. Hidalgo Academy, an alternative high school, is the other high school in Hidalgo ISD. It served 40 students in 2007-08 and is currently reported to serve about 30 students (AEIS, Texas Education Agency).
5. In Texas, students "at-risk" for dropping out of high school are exhaustively defined in §TEC 29.081. Relevant criteria requirements for the purposes of this brief include students under 21 years old who: (1) has been retained a grade level on one or more occasions; (2) are English Language Learners; (3) is in grades 7-12 and did not maintain a grade of 70 (out of 100) in two or more core academic subject areas, during the preceding academic or current school years; (4) has previously dropped out of school; etc.
6. Information on Hidalgo ISD and the state of Texas were Texas Education Agency. Academic Excellence Indicator System Report, 2007-08, Retrieved March 3, 2009. <http://ritter.tea.state.tx.us/cgi/sas/broker>
7. Hidalgo is further invested in creating a community of life-long learners by providing its adult residents, with educational and career pathways (e.g., language academies, workforce academies, THEA College Entrance Exam Academy).
8. Hidalgo Independent School District is representative of all students in the Rio Grande "Valley" in terms of demographics, according to a report written by researchers at the University of Texas at Austin. See: The Dana Center. 2008. Learning Tour: Hidalgo High School. Hidalgo Independent School District, Hidalgo, Texas Profile for Learning Tour conducted on May 22, 2008. Retrieved March 7, 2009. [www.utdanacenter.org/tcstem/learningtours/hidalgo.php](http://www.utdanacenter.org/tcstem/learningtours/hidalgo.php).