



# BACK ON TRACK TO COLLEGE

A Texas School District  
Leverages State Policy to  
Put Dropouts on the Path to  
Success

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**JOBS FOR THE FUTURE**

## JOBS FOR THE FUTURE

Jobs for the Future develops, implements, and promotes new education and workforce strategies that help communities, states, and the nation compete in a global economy. In 200 communities in 41 states and Washington, DC, JFF improves the pathways leading from high school to college to family-sustaining careers.

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# INTRODUCTION

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In the Rio Grande Valley of south Texas, the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District has achieved a startling success over the last two years: it has recovered and graduated over 600 dropouts and put them on a clear pathway to college. Just a few years ago, low graduation rates, struggling high schools, and poor staff and student morale characterized this predominantly Hispanic and low-income tri-city community. Since then, the dropout rate has plummeted and the graduation rate is rising steadily. Under the leadership of Dr. Daniel King, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo illustrates how Texas districts can use innovative state policy to improve graduation rates by reengaging and graduating out-of-school youth.

Pharr-San Juan-Alamo teamed up with South Texas College to create the College, Career, and Technology Academy (CCTA), a college-connected dropout recovery school that puts into action policies Texas has created over the past five years. Through CCTA, former dropouts complete their high school diploma and seamlessly transition into college courses when they are ready. The design is both effective and efficient. Students focus only on what they need for graduation and for college-readiness, and they begin college courses while finishing their high school requirements.

Jobs for the Future has conducted a 50-state scan to identify schools and programs that integrate high school and college for the population of youth who either fall off track to graduation or who drop out altogether. Our scan has identified CCTA as an effective design with compelling outcomes, worthy of replication throughout Texas and nationally.

In launching CCTA, Dr. King leveraged state policies that both provide incentives for districts to recover dropouts and enable postsecondary transitions for all students, including recovered dropouts. Texas allocates per-pupil funding based on average daily attendance (ADA) for recovered students immediately, without the one-year (or even two-year) delay found in many other states. House Bill 1137 supported the efforts through its authorization of state funding for school districts to collect ADA to help young people up to age 26 receive high school diplomas. Texas also encourages districts to reengage dropouts by giving them credit in its state accountability system for

recovering dropouts. If former dropouts recover credits quickly and graduate with their cohort or if they remain enrolled and progressing towards a degree up until age 26, they count in the high school longitudinal completion rate for the district. If they drop out again, they are only counted once as a dropout in the district's longitudinal completion rate for the state's accountability system.<sup>1</sup>

Through Texas's forward-thinking House Bill 1, the state provides significant provisions and funding to increase college and career readiness. House Bill 1 requires all school districts to make the equivalent of 12 hours of college credit available to students while in high school. The bill also includes a high school allotment that can be used to cover the costs for tuition, fees, and textbooks for students taking dual credit courses. Additionally, as a result of passage of significant dropout prevention legislation in 2007 (House Bill 2237), Texas launched the Texas Dropout Recovery Pilot Program. This competitive grant program provides performance-based funding to enable dropouts to return to school to earn a standards-based high school diploma or meet a bar of demonstrated college readiness. The program allows for multiple types of education providers, including nonprofits and community colleges, and provides a great deal of flexibility to encourage innovation and override "seat time," or requiring a certain number of hours in a classroom as a proxy for learning, and other constraints. Through this grant program, Texas extends its commitment to college-readiness to all students—even those who had formerly dropped out of school.<sup>2</sup>

Texas policies that encourage districts to recover dropouts, provide state funding for students who are over compulsory school age, and promote college-connectedness for students still in high school created the environment for a successful back-on-track program, like CCTA. This case study spotlights how the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District has leveraged policies and conditions that the Texas Legislature put into place and achieved extraordinary outcomes in not only graduating students but also in facilitating smooth transitions to postsecondary education and training.

# THE COLLEGE, CAREER, AND TECHNOLOGY ACADEMY: GETTING YOUTH BACK ON TRACK

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**W**hen Daniel King came to the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District as superintendent in 2007, he found a distressingly high dropout rate. In a district of approximately 31,000 students, almost 500 had dropped out of school the prior year. His quick analysis of the numbers told a story: nearly half of the prior year's dropouts had made it to their senior year before dropping out, and many of them were over-age. Dr. King sprang into action with a call to Dr. Shirley Reed, founding president of South Texas College, inviting her to join the district in opening a school that would reengage former dropouts who lacked only a few credits or passing exit examinations to graduate. Dr. Reed quickly agreed and signed on to a marketing campaign: "You didn't graduate from high school? Start college today!" With this slogan, Dr. King and Dr. Reed recognized that older youth need the promise of a path to adulthood—and not back to their former high school—to entice them back.

Dr. Reed was poised to partner on this issue. Her mission since founding the college had been to create a college-going culture across the region. She knew the dropout statistics through her own analysis of data on area school districts, and she knew that she needed a strong partnership with the district to make a real impact. For years, dropouts from Pharr-San Juan-Alamo had attempted to enroll in college, seeking to gain credentials that would allow them to support themselves and their families. Without a diploma or a GED, enrollment was not possible.

After a short but intensive planning process, and with both Dr. King and Dr. Reed at the table, the CCTA opened in fall 2007 to serve a tightly defined target population: dropouts who were within three credits of graduating or who only needed to pass portions of the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS), the state's standardized graduation exit exam. In designing the school to address a specific subpopulation of students who are off-track to graduation, the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo team was mirroring an emerging best practice undertaken by communities around the country that are seeking to reengage off-track and out-of-school youth. National research indicates that the population of youth who are off

track to graduation, or who have dropped out, varies by both age and distance to graduation, and that tailoring school designs to specific segments of the dropout population (e.g., youth "old and close" to graduation, "young and far" or "old and far" from graduation) results in improved graduation rates. The design of CCTA addresses the particular needs of the target population, enabling them to come back to school not just to recover credits and complete TAKS but also for college-readiness and transition, facilitated through supported dual enrollment and explicit college-prep courses and activities.

In launching CCTA, Pharr-San Juan-Alamo was engaging state policy that promotes attention to this population. Dr. King realized that if he could reenroll students who had previously dropped out, he could increase funding to the district through Average Daily Attendance (ADA). He also recognized that if he could get these students to graduate swiftly, he would improve PSJA's completion rate.<sup>3</sup> According to Dr. King, he acted on his knowledge that "Texas policy actually encourages dropout recovery."

The district also knew that young people respond to personalized outreach. Dr. King and his team launched an intensive recovery campaign supported by area mayors, school leaders and staff, and other community leaders. Team members knocked on the doors of students who had left the rolls at the end of the last school year and not returned. This effort, dubbed "Countdown to Zero," galvanized the community. With billboards, brochures, and direct outreach, the district team ensured that everyone knew about this new opportunity. Young people who did not respond to one visit received two; if a school staff member did not get through, the mayor or the superintendent might show up the next day. "One student had already moved to San Antonio and gotten a job," said Dr. King, illustrating the extent of the community outreach. Despite the student living close to 300 miles away, "his mother called him and told him to come home for this new opportunity; he enrolled the following week." The effort was a great success: over 200 students enrolled in CCTA in the first month.

# DESIGNING FOR POSTSECONDARY SUCCESS

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**W**hen the students arrived at CCTA, they entered a school with a design worthy of attention by other districts in Texas and nationally. All students start with a one-on-one meeting with staff to carefully review what they lack for graduation—credits and TAKS—and a conversation about what they need to do to turn around their performance. Students then enroll in a course of study that addresses those gaps, and CCTA staff arrange a flexible schedule that allows this older population to meet family and work obligations. For example, through Texas’s Optional Flexible School Day policy, students can attend school for as little as 45 minutes per day and still generate pro-rated state ADA funding. CCTA is highly individualized: each semester, staff organize their course scheduling and design the curriculum around the needs of incoming students, closely analyzing TAKS results to identify specific skill gaps.

Because the founders recognized that students need to transition to college, the school is not just credit recovery and TAKS preparation, as is often the case with alternative recovery programs. The school strongly emphasizes helping students develop the foundational and critical-thinking skills needed for postsecondary success, using a multipronged strategy of small classroom courses, on-line skills remediation, intensive reading remediation through Read 180, and tutoring.

CCTA is designed so that young people experience themselves as college students rather than high school dropouts. Through the partnership with South Texas College, students are surrounded by college access opportunities. As soon as they pass the exit-level English Language Arts TAKS, they are eligible to enroll in a limited selection of college courses. CCTA offers the certificate courses—primarily in Career and Technical Education—in a compressed semester or “mini-mester,” based on student interest. Options for dual enrollment include medical terminology, welding, and business computing technology, among others. The state has the Texas Success Initiative (TSI), a college readiness assessment and policy that requires students to be assessed in reading, writing, and math skills before

enrolling in college. Once CCTA students pass the complete TSI standards, they are eligible to take full advantage of STC’s dual enrollment offerings towards earning an AAS (two-year degree).

The students also enroll in South Texas College’s College Success class to ensure they have what it takes to succeed in postsecondary education. College Success helps them develop study skills for college, explore their career interests, and understand their options for high pay-off credentials. “We knew this course would be right for them, because of its emphasis on developing the emotional intelligence to navigate college,” says Dr. Reed. “Not a lot of adaptation to this credit-bearing course was needed for CCTA students because it was designed for struggling students at South Texas College,” she adds.

Registration for college courses is facilitated by a combination of staff from South Texas College and CCTA. This helps keep these first-generation college-goers on track in the critical phase of entering into postsecondary education. Registration happens on site at CCTA. The school offers transportation to the college and arranges other supports, such as child care, to lessen the barriers to postsecondary success. Workforce Solutions, the local Workforce Development Board, is a key partner in providing many of these supports. The district also uses state Pregnancy Education and Parenting funds to defray child care costs.

In addition, through a waiver from the state, the school runs on a college calendar. By taking breaks when the college does, CCTA can save or “bank” days in order to run a summer session. The partners have found that continuous semesters are critical for a reengaging population and banking helps make this possible.

The postsecondary component is furthered by the Texas Dropout Recovery Pilot Program, which grants funds to schools, institutions of higher education, open enrollment charter schools, and community-based organizations to recover dropouts and help them to either graduate with a diploma or gain a GED and meet college-readiness benchmarks. The

program is unusual in not only its focus on dropout recovery but also its funding structure: in addition to base funding, the program gives performance-benchmark funding to CCTA and other grantees based on students' academic progress, graduation, and completion of college courses.

The school has also created a mentoring program: each student has an adult who is watching out for them as they progress toward a high school diploma and college credits. This is accomplished through a scheduled Mentor course, which functions like a student advisory meeting. The Mentor course addresses readiness for both college and careers, with students visiting colleges, completing interest inventories, and developing resumes. CCTA also offers tutoring before and after the school day and on Saturdays.

# EXPANSION AND REPLICATION

**B**ased on the success of CCTA, the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District has expanded the program in three ways. First, CCTA now serves students lacking up to five credits instead of three. Second, students in the district's high schools who end their senior year without the credits and TAKS to graduate are automatically enrolled in CCTA for summer school, and for as many subsequent semesters as are needed; there is no more falling off the radar screen. If students have passed the exit-level English language arts TAKS, they take college courses in the fall like the rest of their cohort while completing their high school degree and finishing the math TAKS. Third, the program has expanded, thanks to House Bill 1137, to help students earn a diploma up to age 26. As a result, more than 100 of the school's graduates have been dropouts over the age of 21.

The CCTA design is easily replicable—in fact, several neighboring districts have launched their own versions, recognizing the boost this can give to graduation rates. The per-pupil cost is lower than that of a traditional high school, despite the smaller class sizes, because of savings on non-academic expenditures (e.g., sports and clubs).

Moreover, as Dr. King points out, all CCTA students generate state revenue: “If on the first day of school you find you have 200 new students to the district, you don’t start by working out a budget. You start by serving those students. You celebrate the growth of your student population. These young people are no different.”

Texas is gaining national recognition for creating a platform of incentives for the development of successful dropout recovery programs such as CCTA and for improved graduation rates.<sup>4</sup> Texas is also unusual in connecting dropout recovery to its overall college-readiness and college/career success agenda. State policy reflects the recognition that all students need postsecondary education and training, including those who have struggled in school, fallen off track to graduation, and dropped out.

## Texas Policies that Support the Reengagement of Dropouts

- > *Accountability incentives promote the recovery of dropouts:* Districts get credit in their state longitudinal completion rates for recovered out-of-school youth who graduate with their cohort or persist towards a secondary degree. If a recovered dropout drops out again, it only counts once for a district's longitudinal completion rate.
- > *Financing policies promote the recovery of youth who have dropped out:* House Bill 1137 authorizes funding for school districts to help young people, up to age 26, receive a high school diploma. Districts get immediate reimbursement for recovered dropouts.
- > *Performance incentives encourage high standards through the Dropout Recovery Pilot Program:* Districts are rewarded for getting former dropouts to hit benchmarks that will graduate them college-ready and help them transition to postsecondary education.
- > *Dual enrollment policy facilitates college course-taking by high school students:* Robust dual enrollment legislation provides funding for students to take college courses, and the state also has developed clear standards for readiness to enroll in freshman-level academic courses through the Texas Success Initiative. At the same time, the state makes it possible for struggling students, such as returning dropouts, to take college-level technical courses while working on improving college readiness across all subject areas, once they pass an initial bar.
- > *Flexible means for schools to access ADA facilitate school designs that meet off-track students' needs:* The Optional Flexible School Day allows districts to provide flexible hours and days of attendance for those youth who are unable to attend school in a traditional setting. Through Optional Flexible School Day, students may receive instruction for as little as 45 minutes per day and generate per-pupil funding.



# ENDNOTES

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<sup>1</sup> Multiple dropouts currently do count against a district's annual dropout rate. The state is considering modifications to this policy in order to further encourage districts to recover dropouts.

<sup>2</sup> Jobs for the Future's forthcoming national scan of dropout prevention and recovery policy cites Texas for its groundbreaking policy that emphasizes both prevention and recovery. Few other states can boast of adopting this twin approach to curbing the number of dropouts.

<sup>3</sup> Former dropouts who graduate with their cohort or remain enrolled will count in the state completion rate. Former dropouts who graduate after their cohort has graduated are reported but not for state accountability purposes.

<sup>4</sup> A recent national report from the National Governors Association highlighted Texas policies.



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