

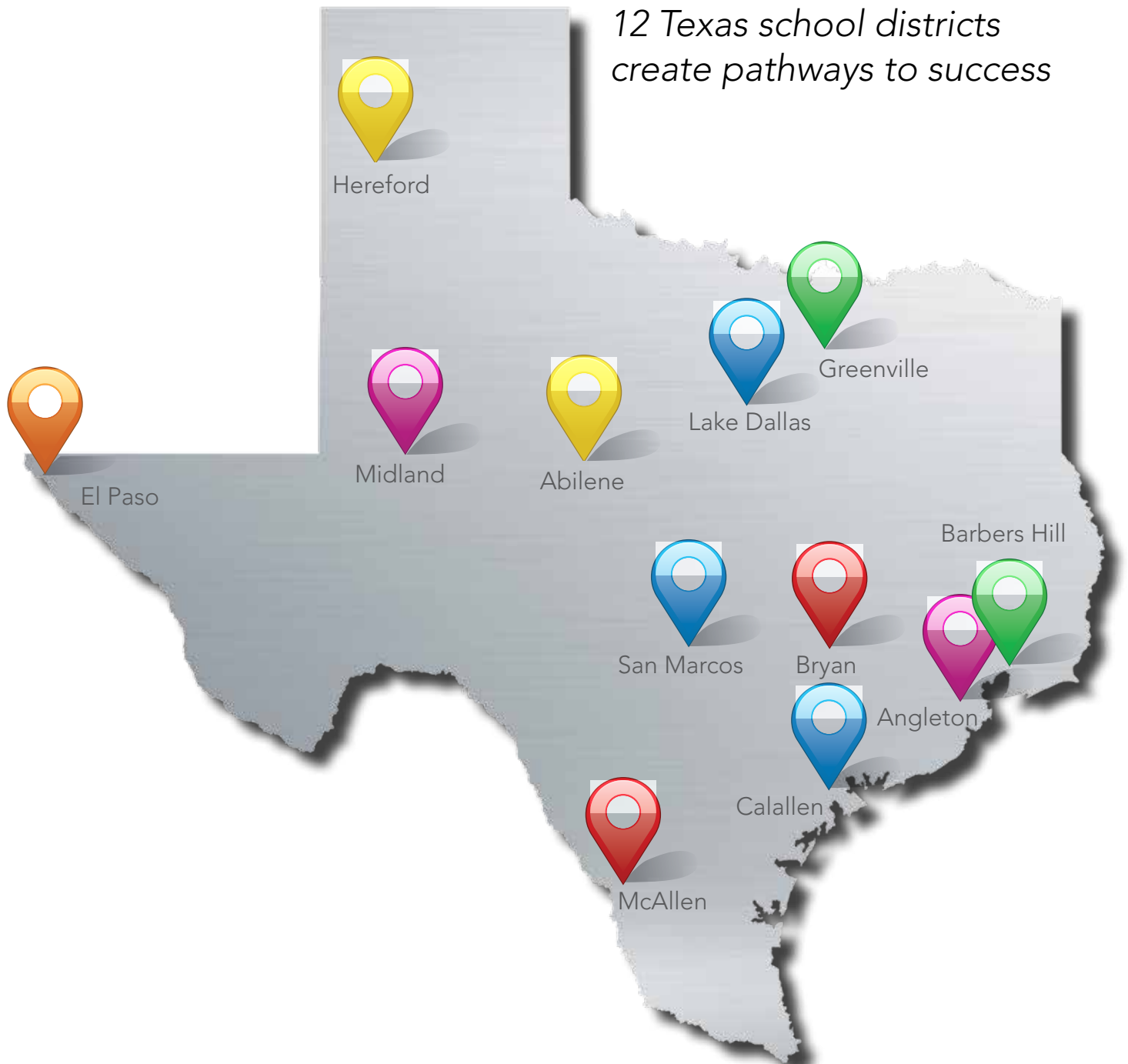
Sixth Annual

# BRAGGING RIGHTS

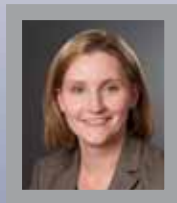
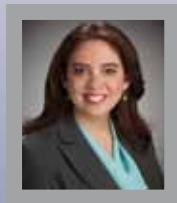
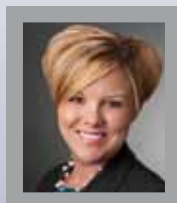
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2012-2013

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Sixth Annual

# BRAGGING RIGHTS

2012-2013



From the editor

I say this every year, but I'm going to say it again: Producing the *Bragging Rights* issue is such an inspiring and rewarding experience! This year we had so many stellar nominations from which to choose. Administrators and teachers from all corners of the Lone Star State submitted a wide range of success stories, making it difficult for us to choose only 12 programs to highlight in this annual issue. However, we managed to narrow it down, and we are honored to share these exemplary programs with you.

We could not have produced this issue without the keen insights and observations of our *Bragging Rights* panelists, who each took the time to review the nominations and suggest their top 12. From their three lists, we at *Texas School Business* selected the final 12.

This year's panelists were:

- Linsae Snider, executive director, Texas School Public Relations Association
- Suzanne Marchman, director of communications and media relations, Texas Association of School Administrators; and
- Clyde Steelman, executive director, ESC Region 11.

A big "thank you" to our panelists and to all the people who nominated such brag-worthy programs. We are humbled and honored to share your stories with our readers.




Katie Ford

Katie Ford




 Linsae Snider



 Suzanne Marchman



 Clyde Steelman

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# District cranks up the student experience with top-notch magnet programs

by Karen Adler

At Abilene ISD, “college and career ready” isn’t just a catchphrase tossed around at board meetings. It’s a promise, thanks to three innovative magnet programs, all located at an institution of higher education.

The three programs — two high school level and one elementary level — emphasize math, science, technology and health care and have proven hugely successful. Magnet students overall boast higher attendance rates and test scores, and high school magnet students are graduating with college credit and marketable certifications.

The divide between K-12 education and higher education is closing fast.

It’s a major turnaround for a West Texas district that six years ago only offered two traditional high schools.

“Our magnets are an opportunity to experience great rigor while delving into programs of study that are specific and geared toward a student’s area of interest,” Abilene ISD Superintendent Heath Burns says. “The end result is more college-ready students who graduate from AISD with both the capacity and confidence to succeed in career and college pathways.”

Almost a decade ago, the Abilene ISD Board of Trustees appointed a 20-member task force of education, community and business leaders to study the feasibility of magnet programs.

Task force members noted that a health science magnet program would be critical to keeping graduates in West Texas — and Abilene, in particular, which has a large medical community.



Phil Ashby

There was one major problem.

“We didn’t have the finances to build a building, and we didn’t want a school-within-a-school concept,” recalls Phil Ashby, former director of Holland Medical High School, the district’s first magnet program. “The idea was to make this special.”

## Holland Medical High School

District leaders approached officials at Hardin-Simmons University in Abilene; they were thrilled at the prospect of a partnership but also lacked space and funding.

Enter Scotty Holland, an Abilene High School graduate who went on to play football at Hardin-Simmons and later became CEO of Pennzoil. He already was a major donor to the university, and he liked the idea of a private institution joining forces with a public school district to create such a program.

Holland funded construction of the Holland Health Science Building, which was built on the university campus specifically to serve the needs of a magnet high school. The building is across the street from Hendrick Medical Center, which also provided partial funding and offers clinical rotations for magnet students studying to be nursing aides, pharmacy technicians, dental assistants, medical assistants and phlebotomy technicians.

Since Holland Medical High School opened for the 2007-2008 school year, enrollment in Abilene ISD’s health science program has doubled, and students have earned more than 300 industry-ready certificates, says Ashby, now the district’s director of communications.

About 200 juniors and seniors from Abilene High School and Cooper High School spend half their day on the Hardin-Simmons campus.

Shane Davidson, Hardin-Simmons’ vice president for enrollment and marketing management, says that after graduation, students are ready to enter the workforce or pursue a college degree.

The partnership is a win-win-win for the school district, the university and Abilene, especially considering the statewide shortage of nurses and health care providers in general, says Davidson, who was elected to the Abilene ISD Board of Trustees this past May.

It creates a recruiting pipeline for the university, and “health care is an opportunity that is always going to be there,” Davidson adds. “There’s always going to be a need for health care workers.”

A year after Holland opened, Abilene ISD was ready to expand its magnet offerings, but this time the district shifted its focus to younger students.

## McMagnets

Selected by lottery from elementary schools across Abilene ISD, a single fifth-grade class of students are now known proudly as “McMagnets” because they attend school full time on the McMurry University campus. The magnet program focuses on math and

See ABILENE on page 8



Superintendent  
Heath Burns



Sharlyn Bammel

science, but students receive instruction in all academic areas.

"It's a fabulous set up," says McMagnet teacher Sharlyn Bammel. "We have access to professors who are experts in the field, and they'll work with students. It's very integrated."

For example, Bammel will teach a lesson about electric circuits, and then a McMurry engineering professor will visit the class and help students create an actual motor. Even the president of McMurry, a former aeronautical engineer, stops by on occasion.

As an added bonus, McMurry college students serve as tutors to the McMagnets, who also have access to the university's state-of-the-art science labs and many of the campus' music, art and recreational facilities — including an Olympic-size pool where swimming, canoeing and kayaking lessons are offered.

"It's really an exciting year for them," Bammel says. "It opens their eyes to all kinds of possibilities out there. 'Science is everywhere,' I tell them. It's fun and it's challenging."

The first class of McMagnets took the eighth grade STAAR test last year. Though the state hasn't set passing scores yet, as a whole the McMagnet students scored higher than their peers, Bammel says.

"Long term, I'm hoping they'll maintain their interest in math and science," she says.

Each summer since 2009, McMurry has hosted a science camp for future McMagnets, as well as a week-long camp for each of the former classes of students. The goal is to keep everyone engaged in science until they get to high school.

When they do reach high school, Abilene ISD students now have two magnet programs from which to choose: Holland Medical High School or the Academy of Technology Engineering Math & Science (ATEMS High School).

### ATEMS High School

ATEMS, pronounced like "atoms" and located on the campus of Texas State Technical College, is one of roughly 100 "New Tech Network" high schools in the United States — and one of only 15 in Texas. The school uses the project-based learning curriculum from the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation and provides dual-credit coursework and internships.

Now in its fourth year of existence, ATEMS boasts about 310 full-time students in grades nine through 12. The student-computer ratio is one to one, and students acquire 21st century skills through real-world problems and scenarios. Graduates of this year's first senior class will receive either a Recommended or Distinguished diploma, and many students will leave ATEMS with somewhere between 12 and 36 hours of college credit.

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"We all have this dream that education should be different," says John Martinez, director of the AT-EMS High School. "Every one of us — every teacher, every administrator — is striving to fulfill that dream."

John Martinez

That dream means treating students like individuals and recognizing that each has different interests and paths to success.

"(ATEMS) is not teacher-centered; it's student-centered," Martinez says.

Up until this year, for example, students had to give up extracurricular activities if they wanted to attend ATEMS. In an effort to improve the student experience, for the first time this year ATEMS students can participate in choir, band, orchestra and JROTC at Abilene High School or Cooper High School.

ATEMS takes college-readiness just as seriously. In early October, the school shut down for half a day so that every student could visit a college campus. Freshmen went to McMurry, sophomores went to Abilene Christian University, juniors went to Cisco College, and seniors went to Hardin-Simmons. In the spring, they'll take a full day to visit out-of-town campuses.

Coordinating all those campus visits to occur in one day isn't easy, but it's critical that students understand that college is important, Martinez says.



District leaders say both students and community members have fully embraced Abilene ISD's commitment to magnet schools.

It's this kind of flexibility and nontraditional structure that should be driving public education, says Superintendent Burns, who adds that the district hopes to expand its magnet offerings in the future.

"As school choice becomes more of a reality, it is imperative that all public schools become more entrepreneurial in nature," he says. "Public schools must find creative ways to attract and retain high-quality students."

**KAREN ADLER** is a communications specialist for Northside ISD.

*Larry Sharp, professor of biology at McMurry University, conducts a lab for Abilene ISD's McMagnets.*

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## Angleton ISD

# WHOA day of service projects teach life lessons, good citizenry

by Jennifer LeClaire



Superintendent  
Pat Montgomery

Sue Peters wanted to help Angleton High students give a big “thanks” to the surrounding community, so she took a page from Texas A&M University’s playbook and decided to launch a “Big Event” that Angleton Wildcats could call their own.

Modeled after a university program that has expanded to 75 other schools, the Big Event is a one-day service project that gives Angleton High School students an opportunity show how much they appreciate the community’s support.

Through Wildcats Helping Out Angleton (also known as WHOA), students show their gratitude by doing tasks at the homes of area residents. The idea is to promote school and community unity by making Angleton a better place to live and work.

“We know that sometimes students learn more outside of the classroom than within its four walls,” says Peters, advisor for the National Honor Society (NHS) at Angleton High School. “That’s the idea behind WHOA. Our kids learn real-life lessons you can’t teach them in a textbook, including the importance of giving back to the community.”

### Anatomy of WHOA

Here’s how it works: In November, NHS students begin spreading the word in the community about the service day. Also, residents and business owners can submit forms for outdoors jobs they want students to complete. Typical jobs range from gardening to painting to window washing. In 2011, 200 students joined forces with about 25 faculty to complete 35 jobs. This year’s goal is 50 jobs.

“Our students go to businesses and ask if they can put fliers on the counter. They go to Lion’s Club or Rotary Club meetings and ask if they can speak for a few minutes. They visit senior citizen centers and churches to pitch the idea,” Peters explains. “This year, students are going to all of the area schools to speak during faculty meetings. It’s all about getting the word out, and they’re learning public speaking and marketing skills as they go.”

NHS students also recruit classmates to sign up for the day of service. Each team includes a faculty member who accompanies the students on the job site to ensure their safety. Projects are not selected based on financial need; the only requirement is that the work is done within the school’s zip code.

“Some of the students participate because they need the community service hours or they are trying to build their resumes for college,” Peters says. “But in the end, they feel good about it. They learn that it’s better to give than to receive, even though some of the residents give back by baking cookies or handing out water.”

While some NHS committees begin planning and organizing the event in November, others start marketing and raising funds for supplies and tools, which typically are purchased in January. WHOA collects job forms until the middle of March and then begins forming teams to deploy on the big day, the first weekend in April.

### Developing problem-solving skills

“Students are learning leadership, organizational and logistics skills, as well as problem-solving skills,” says Superintendent Pat Montgomery. “Students have to determine the right tools for the job. They also have to learn how to build strong teams that are appropriate for each job and then how to work together as a team. And they have to learn how to stick together, even when things turn ugly.”

Things did turn ugly at one job site. Last year, the students were unpleasantly surprised when they showed up at a house that was in much worse condition than expected. When the students drove by the house from the road, it looked like a relatively quick job. However, the backyard was full of trash and weeds.

Peters recalls: “The teacher told me he was so impressed because the kids just said, ‘OK, well, this is what it is and we’re just going to do it.’ It was disgusting, but the kids never complained. They were polite to the homeowners, and they were proud of themselves.”

One of the most unusual jobs the WHOA volunteers did last year was fertilize 150 trees near the Stephen F. Austin statue outside of town. The elderly man who requested the help said it usually took him six weeks to do the job by himself. Fifteen Angleton ISD students completed the job in three hours.

In another job, the students cleaned up a building that the district has dedicated as the Angleton ISD History Center. Peters says the students were so excited about the transformation that they took





Angleton ISD junior Tylor Cherry (left) and teacher Vlasta Silhavy work together to clean up an Angleton resident's yard. Both students and teachers get involved in WHOA community projects.

photos of themselves in front of the museum. Now when they drive by the building, she says, the students have the satisfaction of knowing they helped beautify the city.

### Teen challenges

Of course, pulling off the day of service event comes with challenges. Peters admits that students tend to procrastinate because they don't realize how quickly

See ANGLETON on page 12

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A group of WHOA students pose with the results of their hard work. The crew's assignment was to trim trees and bushes and clear leaves and branches. This was the first of two homes the crew helped to clean up during the Big Event.



ANGLETON continued from page 11

November turns into April. But, she adds, the students pull it together and make it happen. WHOA students also sometimes encounter prejudice from potential clients who don't initially trust a group of teenagers to handle the job.

"We have to make people feel comfortable with the idea that a group of teenagers is coming to their house," Peters says. "Sometimes people are a little skeptical about teenagers. Last year we sent a letter to everyone we visited to let them know we'd be willing to come back again, and we included a work form. Almost everyone said they would love to have our students out again."

Some Angleton ISD graduates who participated in WHOA last year have said they want to participate again this year. Because WHOA is reserved for active student body only, Peters has told the graduates to start similar initiatives at their colleges or in their new communities — and some have done so. That's how she knows the program is effecting real change.

#### Letting students lead

"I've learned how important it is to let the students take a leadership role and just offer guidance when needed," Peters says. "Last year my president had a system to organize jobs and I thought there was an easier way to do it, but I let her go and what she did worked."

"Students are creative. They have great ideas, and they are more capable than we think. If they make a mistake, they learn from it and grow. But they are making an impact now," she says.

WHOA teamed up with Keep Angleton Beautiful (KAB) this past April and hosted its annual service

'We know that sometimes students learn more outside of the classroom than within its four walls.'

— Sue Peters, advisor,  
National Honor Society,  
Angleton High School

day during the citywide KAB cleanup. Although the students weren't seeking the recognition, WHOA participants won a KAB award for their hard work in April. The award recognizes the efforts of individuals and groups who "work to better the community and protect the Lone Star State."

"I am impressed with our kids and what they do. I am impressed by their willingness to get up at 6 a.m. and give up a Saturday to go clean up someone's yard or paint their house," Montgomery says. "Through WHOA, they have truly come to understand what this community has done for them, and they want to give back. If the future is in the hands of these young men and women who are showing their love to their community, then the future will be wonderful."

 **JENNIFER LECLAIRE** is a freelance writer who also has written for *The New York Times*.





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## Barbers Hill ISD

# Elementary school plants foundation for growing and learning

by Autumn Rhea Carpenter



Superintendent  
Greg Poole

When nutrition requirements in school cafeterias nationwide were changing in 2010, Barbers Hill ISD School Nutrition Director Susan LeBlanc knew it was time to update her teaching tactics as well. In the past, LeBlanc had visited classrooms as a guest speaker to talk about nutrition, but moving forward she wanted to do something more hands-on with her lesson plans. In two years, she combined her love of gardening with 600 square feet of unused school property to create a thriving teaching garden that has reaped bountiful harvests of healthy foods and learning opportunities.

Among other things, the revamped Texas School Nutrition Policy requires fresh fruits and vegetables at every meal. Actually convincing children to eat those vegetables is a whole other challenge. For decades, mealtimes have ended with parents and children sitting at opposite ends of the table debating the value of eating spinach. Yet LeBlanc has overcome many children's skepticism by bringing ownership to the table and making the process of growing vegetables a fun learning experience.



Carol Layman

Says Barbers Hill Primary School counselor Carol Layman: "Susan's task was to make vegetables fun so that students would try them and hopefully begin to eat the kinds of food that would be good for them too."

The concept began with creating a small strawberry patch for special education students to tend. Yet LeBlanc didn't stop there. She contacted the primary school principal, teachers, high school agriculture students, grounds crew and local master gardeners and explained her plan for a teaching garden. With the district's support, LeBlanc invited the Barbers Hill Primary School second grade teachers to participate in creating the school's first school garden. The thinking was that second graders were mature enough to work in the garden, and it would give first graders something to look forward to the following year. Soon, everyone was ready to dig in the dirt.



*Second graders at Barbers Hill Primary School show off an abundant carrot crop.*





LeBlanc devised an intricate layout and assigned each second grader a 12x12-inch plot. Each student was given a marker to stake his or her piece of land.

"The first year, we loaded 66 kids, including the high school Future Farmers of America, on a bus and asked them to help us pull weeds at the garden site," says LeBlanc. "Within 30 minutes, the weeds were gone. I heard many of the high school students comment that the closest they got to gardening in the second grade was a bean cup."

The second graders plant their fall garden in mid-October and harvest it in February; the spring garden starts in March and is harvested at the end of the school year. In the fall, the garden includes broccoli, cauliflower, three types of lettuce, snow peas and carrots. The spring garden includes tomatoes, green beans, corn, cucumbers, watermelon and cantaloupe.

"After we finished planting the seeds the first year, all you could see was a sea of white sticks with the second graders' names popping out," says LeBlanc. "I was as anxious as the students to see the results."

Excitement grew as the students vigilantly checked their plots. While the students waited, LeBlanc taught them about composting.

"The kids loved stuffing the compost bin with

leaves, food scraps, eggshells and grass clippings and watching it spin around," says LeBlanc. "It was a great opportunity to teach them that many materials can be reused and put back into the soil to help the garden grow."

LeBlanc uses curricula from the National Junior Master Garden program. In 2011, the second graders completed the certification program for growing a vegetable garden. This program has offered many hands-on, interdisciplinary learning opportunities.

"The students learned how important bees and pollination are to the environment," says LeBlanc. "They also used measuring and counting skills to plant and water the seeds; analyzed soil for proper light, water and nutrients; learned the effects of regional climate on the plants; watched two green tomato hornworms evolve into moths; and got regular exercise. This garden made learning fun and gave us a chance to go beyond the textbook to make long-lasting memories."

The second graders also study which parts of a plant can be eaten, as well as the function of each part. Students learn that the roots absorb nutrients and water; stems act as the plant's plumbing system; leaves capture sunlight; flowers contain the plant's reproductive parts; fruit covers the seeds; and seeds

*School Nutrition Director Susan LeBlanc demonstrates how to pick broccoli for a second grade class. Students have enjoyed eating their home-grown vegetables; the Primary School cafeteria has seen a 25 percent increase in demand for vegetables during lunchtime.*

See BARBERS HILL on page 16

contain new plants. After completing the lesson, the second graders partner with high school FFA members and take their fresh and canned vegetables to the local outreach center's food pantry.

### Growing pains

In creating the school garden, LeBlanc learned that some vegetables grew faster than others, which left some students with nothing to anticipate for the next three months.

"I learned that radishes grow really fast and cabbage takes up a lot of space," she says. "I was learning along with the students about how to stage it out so that each student's plot was constantly growing something."

For instance, LeBlanc learned that broccoli and carrots have longer growth periods than lettuce and spinach, so she now groups these vegetables together so that students can enjoy the harvest more than once.

Because the students grew the vegetables, they were more prone to taste-test the results. At harvest time, each classroom shares their fresh produce in a classroom salad bar.

"By 2011, 25 percent more students ordered vegetables in the cafeteria than in 2010," says LeBlanc. "I'd say at least 90 percent of the children are willing to taste these vegetables, and a few usually return

for seconds. When a student, beaming with pride, pulls a carrot out of her garden plot, eating healthily suddenly becomes fun."

Often the garden produces more vegetables than the students can eat. When this happens, the children pack their backpacks with broccoli and carrots.

*'I'd say at least 90 percent of the children are willing to taste these vegetables, and a few usually return for seconds. When a student, beaming with pride, pulls a carrot out of her garden plot, eating healthily suddenly becomes fun.'*

— Susan LeBlanc, school nutrition director, Barbers Hill ISD



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"The kids are always thrilled to share the garden with their families," says LeBlanc. "It's become a tradition to watch the second graders load the school bus waving their big carrots. Many of the students convince their parents to eat vegetables they had never eaten before, and some of them even convince their parents to grow their own home gardens."

The second grade garden is a project that Superintendent Greg Poole thinks other school districts could implement.

"We are all guilty of traditional thinking, but student obesity is a growing problem, and it requires progressive, innovative strategies," he says. "Learning is about engaging a student's mind, and our garden is an ideal example of instruction without walls. Mrs. LeBlanc is a leader in both the lunchroom and in the garden."

The Barbers Hill second grade garden has accomplished more than plentiful harvests; it has created learning opportunities and a new approach to healthy living. LeBlanc has even added gardens at the intermediate and middle school campuses.

"Mrs. LeBlanc has connected learning with fun in such a way that she is creating a healthier generation," says Layman. "She deserves huge kudos for taking the initiative and following through with this worthwhile project."

**AUTUMN RHEA CARPENTER** writes content for regional and national magazines, newspapers, companies and websites.



*Barbers Hill students Emily Quartz and Christian Royer won top honors with their tomato plants in the horticulture category at the Youth Project Show this past May.*



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Robotics class at Hudson ISD



Bryan ISD

# High school Journalism Department moves into the Digital Age

by Shelley Seale



Superintendent  
Tommy Wallis

On Oct. 5, 2012, the Bryan High School Vikings football team took the field against Conroe Oak Ridge — and for one player in particular it was a big moment. Senior Chris Johnson was playing one of his last games as a Viking and would soon trade in his uniform for the green and gold of Baylor University, which recruited him as a Bears quarterback.

The story was covered online in *The Norseman*, Bryan High School's digital newspaper, and also was posted on Twitter and the school's Facebook page, reaching thousands of football fans instantly. This is one example of the way Bryan High School has entered the digital age of journalism, making a historically print-based medium relevant and competitive while preparing students for the future — and the real-world job market.

"Our aim was to take a traditional print product and transfer it to have an online presence to mirror the newspaper in a traditional way, while also adding in social media avenues to stay relevant," says Rebecca Dominy, journalism advisor.

First, the Journalism Department at Bryan High created an online newspaper at <http://bryanhighnorseman.com>, which refreshes content each weekday. Dominy says that the online paper creates an environment where students, parents and community members are given new information on a daily basis.

"They know to look to us to stay updated on school info," she says.

But simply creating a digital newspaper wasn't enough. The Journalism Department needed to implement a plan for the school's entire online presence. This plan included:

- publishing news article through an RSS feed;
- automatically uploading new content to Twitter and Facebook;
- uploading photos of sports and events to Flickr;
- creating *The Norseman* iPhone app; and
- creating a YouTube video channel for the Journalism Department.

"Creating a presence in social media allows us to meet the students where they live and deliver information to them directly," Dominy adds. For example, the YouTube channel features commercials produced by the yearbook classes. One of these, a spoof on the Geico Insurance commercials, received more than 25,000 views.

"This project was a great experience for the students because it pushed them to be creative while help-

ing them learn how to appropriately communicate a message. It really encouraged the students and proved to them there was value in what they were creating," Dominy says.

Emily Nash, a junior and a co-editor at *The Norseman*, agrees that the digital journalism program has enhanced her learning and creativity.

"Writing feature articles helped me realize how diverse our school is and taught me how to communicate with all sorts of people," she says. "Not only did I learn how to write in a journalistic style, but being on the staff also taught me communication skills that will be useful in several different situations other than reporting. I also realized the importance of keeping up with social media and advancing through technology, such as using Twitter and Facebook, as well as making a website for our paper."

In fact, Nash's experience reinforces the popular idea that traditional classroom learning is changing. Bryan High School's move into the world of digital journalism is proof that schools can adjust successfully to the ever-changing nature of technology.

## Learn as you go

The move to digital journalism wasn't without its challenges, however. One of the biggest obstacles in moving the newspaper online was meeting the demands of an expedited production schedule. Moving to a daily publication after having published one print newspaper every six weeks was a difficult task. Dominy cites Google Calendar as one helpful online sharing tool the journalism team has used to manage the publishing schedule.

Another challenge came when the team first created its social media presence and needed to build up that initial following. According to Dominy, to garner a social media audience, her department held drawings and gave away prizes to followers and fans on Twitter and Facebook.

"The entire program has allowed us to communicate with parents and community members on a much higher level than we were ever able to before," she says. "Students also have greater access by carrying around our product in their pockets on their smartphones."

Nash says that being a part of the digital journalism staff helps her feel more involved with school and up to date with what's going on across the campus.





Bryan High School junior Emily Nash and senior Emma Raleigh, co-editors of *The Norseman*, update and post articles to the digital newspaper's website, which refreshes every weekday.

"Aside from school involvement, participating at UIL events got me used to writing under pressure, which was beneficial in working with time-sensitive situations," she adds.

The BHS team won first place at the Midway Invitational UIL awards, in which students competed in the categories of news, feature writing, and editorial and headline writing.

"Joining *The Norseman* staff made me realize what kind of jobs you can get as a writer and the importance of creating a history through writing," Nash says.

John Fuller, a Bryan High School graduate, can attest to the value of a high-quality digital journalism program. Fuller, who graduated in May, was editor of *The Norseman* during his junior and senior years.

"Clearly, the journalism market is going through a significant change as more and more people consume their news online," says Fuller, who attends The University of Texas. "We wanted to not only learn how to write and publish for this new medium, but also to expand our paper to better serve our audience. ... This means moving to and continuing to expand our online presence."

Fuller explains that moving to digital news reporting allowed the newspaper staff to be more flexible with what and when they publish — as well as to connect more directly with their audience.

"Both of these things are incredibly appealing," he says. "Students and parents do have a desire to read the school paper and be informed on what's going on around campus. It became apparent that moving online would allow us to better connect with this audience."

Like Nash, Fuller says he felt more connected to his school because of his experience at *The Norseman*.

"By working on the school paper, you become much more entrenched in your school. You not only know about what's going on, but you feel a personal con-

## Resources and links

The Norseman: <http://bryanhighnorseman.com>

Twitter page: <http://twitter.com/bhsnorseman>

Facebook page: [www.facebook.com/BryanISDBryanHighNorseman](http://www.facebook.com/BryanISDBryanHighNorseman)

Flickr page: [www.flickr.com/photos/bhsnorseman](http://www.flickr.com/photos/bhsnorseman)

RSS feed: <http://bryanhighnorseman.com/feed>

iOS app: <https://itunes.apple.com/us/app/norseman/id438980112?mt=8>

Youtube channel: <http://youtube.com/rmdominy>

nection to your school. I think working on this project made me a better student because I truly wanted my school to be represented well."

Bryan ISD Superintendent Tommy Wallis says that the high school's online initiatives have allowed Bryan High to attract a wider audience than ever before.

"Staying true to solid journalistic principles and instruction, Mrs. Dominy and her students have found ways to keep the journalism program interesting and relevant to the student body. This program is a great representation of transformational thinking and learning."

Dominy strives to run *The Norseman* at the same level of a professional newsstand publication, albeit on a smaller scale.

Says Dominy: "The changes that have been made in this course are vital to the existence of journalism. As journalism continues to change and evolve, schools have to adapt their programs to prepare their students for those changes. And as students turn to the Internet and social media for their news, we must place ourselves at the forefront of that movement to stay relevant. In an age of fast-paced information, high school journalism must find a way to serve our audience."

**SHELLEY SEALE** is a freelance writer and author of "The Weight of Silence," which chronicles the plight of India's street children.

# Bergenfield Public Schools drive student growth with data.

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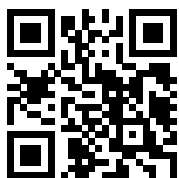
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# District spearheads program that offers dual-credit courses for students across region

by Elizabeth Millard

Increasingly, collaboration is a vital part of public education. Students are encouraged to learn how to work together to better prepare them for the collaborative nature of higher education and the business world.

Calallen ISD is leading by example with the creation of the Northwest Center for Advanced Studies (NCAS), where students from multiple school districts are able to earn college credit. The students take classes at the NCAS campus several mornings per week. The center's creation required a partnership with two institutes of higher education and five school districts — and an abundance of communication with parents and teachers.



Janet Cunningham

"Our schools are very diverse, and some students felt they didn't have the opportunity to pursue higher education," says NCAS Director Janet Cunningham. "This program is changing that. They feel a sense of accomplishment, of knowing they can be successful. It's already growing fast, and that's not surprising because we all love it."

The NCAS program got its start about three years ago when Calallen ISD Superintendent Arturo Almendarez looked at the numbers for dual-credit classes. He felt that his district could be doing a much better job. One of the major drivers in putting the NCAS in place was to boost college-readiness in area districts. The Academic Excellence Indicator System (AEIS) reports for ESC Region 2 indicated that students from the region were scoring below the state average on college-readiness indicators.

Providing students with challenging coursework in high school tended to boost successful transitions to higher education, so it made sense to provide higher-level classes, but Almendarez noted that there weren't enough teachers with master's degrees in the district who could teach college-level classes.

Because the area is home to Del Mar College and Texas A&M University at Kingsville is only 30 miles away, Almendarez proposed to these institutions a program in which college professors would come to the district and teach classes four days a week (with the fifth day serving as lab work). There was only one sticking point: The district didn't have enough students ready for those types of classes to create the type of robust program that Almendarez envisioned.

Rather than abandon the idea altogether, Almendarez shifted his energy toward recruiting four surrounding districts to join him.

"From there, the program blossomed," he says. "The superintendents in those districts saw how valuable this would be, and we all worked together to create a great program."

Joining Calallen at NCAS are Banquete, Mathis, Odem and Robstown ISDs.

When the program launched in 2010, there were 120 juniors and seniors in the program. This past year, 211 joined. In 2012-2013, 255 are participating. About 97 percent of NCAS students pass their college classes.

NCAS offers 24 college courses, and students can earn up to 10 hours of college credit per semester. Those credits can transfer to any state college or university in Texas. The program is open to all students who meet college-entry requirements, with courses offered at a reduced rate — between \$165 and \$180, depending on the class. A grant from the Kenedy Foundation and an agreement from Del Mar and Texas A&M to reduce their standard fees are keeping those costs low.

The range of courses includes rhetoric, psychology, sociology, politics, economics and college-level algebra. Del Mar College also offers courses in culinary arts, cosmetology, firefighter certification and automotive technology. The classes tend to be those which students would take in their first year of college, which gives them a head start when they do transfer to higher education. The most popular classes this past year were U.S. history and college algebra.

Almendarez notes that many NCAS students are economically disadvantaged, and several will be the first in their families to attend college. Because of the program's focus on making the classes affordable and accessible, those students have a strong chance of going on to higher education.

"It's wonderful to see the kids from different districts coming together for this," he says. "Growth has mainly been from word of mouth, and we expect that to continue."

Calallen ISD sidestepped many roadblocks by focusing on collaboration and unity, but that doesn't mean putting together the program was an easy feat.



Superintendent Arturo Almendarez

See CALALLEN on page 23



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"When you're working with different schools with different schedules and putting together this many components, you're going to have challenges," Cunningham says.

She works to coordinate schedules, but because university schedules can change, Cunningham and her team sometimes have to work fast to rearrange classes before the school year begins. Also, because students are coming from different districts and have to be bused back to their schools after attending their NCAS courses, the program requires some coordination with local bus companies to make sure there is reliable transportation.

Parents presented another unexpected challenge. When classes started, some parents began contacting the professors to ask about their children's grades and assignments. Cunningham had to notify parents about appropriate communication channels, which mainly involved contacting her instead of the professors.

"That's been really helpful to set clear expectations," she says. "We knew we had to support parents and students, and now we realize we have to support professors as well."

She adds that it has been a good learning experience for parents to understand what it will be like when their children head off to college.

"Parents have been great about seeing the difference (between high school and college)," Cunningham says. "It's been a transition for all of us to create



a program like this and refine it along the way."

In addition to the growing participation rate at NCAS, students in the 2011-2012 school year earned 1,838 college hours. Furthermore, in the two years of the program's existence, 2,864 college hours have been earned. And because these courses are offered at reduced rates, parents have saved approximately \$775,000 in tuition fees.

Says Cunningham: "The program is clearly a success for everyone: Students are gaining college hours and experience, parents are saving money, and school districts are increasing the college-readiness of students. I think this program demonstrates the kind of innovation that can come from working together and having a shared vision."

 **ELIZABETH MILLARD** also writes for *District Administration* magazine.

*Without the use of a traditional textbook, college algebra students in Andre Mack's class at the Northwest Center for Advanced Studies use various forms of technology to access assignments and supplemental materials.*

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# Comic Life

# Alpha Initiative treats truancy as an invitation to reconnect with at-risk youth



by Bobby Hawthorne

Let's not kid ourselves. It'll be a while before El Paso ISD throws itself a "job well done" party. Its former superintendent was sentenced to prison for orchestrating a cheating scheme, and in the past year the district has been sanctioned by the state and remains under investigation by the FBI.

So don't expect the district to start whooping it up when it does something right or good. For the time being, it's simply working to repair the damage done, especially to the young people on the fringes who mostly have been expendable — until now.

Five years ago El Paso ISD created a one-of-a-kind truancy and dropout prevention program called the Alpha Initiative, which replaced a \$925,000-a-year outsourced program that never once hit its target, if the target was *raising attendance rates*, that is.



"Take 'em to court; that's how it used to be (with the old system)," says Mark Mendoza, El Paso ISD's director of pupil services.

At least that was the attitude until the district decided to bring the truancy program in house and turn it over to Mendoza.

Mike Mendoza

to get back into the lives of students and their families and to assist them in such a way that they have no choice but to return to school," Mendoza says.

In addition to saving the district money, Alpha has increased student attendance every year since its creation, except one: 2009, the year of the swine flu.

"Students have different barriers," Mendoza says. "Some need to work. Some have abuse issues. Many have their own families, so they're forced to decide between caring for a child or two and finishing their education. In that case, we bring in our social worker and/or a district staff person and try to refocus them on the fact that, 'Yes, you can provide better for your baby and your family with an education.'"

Then, an Alpha representative will suggest an alternative education program that fits the student's situation. For example, a 17-year-old student might return to school with no more than five academic credits. Another kid might have been in and out of juvenile detention for years.

While many in society may view these teenagers as drags on the education and legal systems, Mendoza

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Superintendent  
Vernon Butler

## A change in perspective

"At first, I really couldn't figure out why a student would decide not to come to school," Mendoza says. "All I knew was that they were not coming to school. After six months of attending truancy board meetings, my administrative assistant and I realized that a lot of these kids had valid reasons for skipping school. They didn't drop out simply because they didn't like school. That wasn't it. Sometimes, life happens."

So, Mendoza began cherry-picking a team of experts who represented all phases of the truancy cycle: social and mental health workers; representatives from the local police department, the district attorney's office and the juvenile probation courts; folks from Child Protective Services; and so forth. These members came to represent the Alpha Initiative, an effort to find truants and dropouts, convince them to return to school, and help them overcome any and all obstacles between them and higher education or a decent job.

"We began treating truancy as an opportunity



El Paso Mayor John Cook joined El Paso ISD's Alpha Initiative team during the district's Operation Outreach event this year. During the operation, school officials visited the homes of students who had failed to show up at school to find out what circumstances were preventing their attendance.

A close-up, slightly low-angle shot of a young man wearing a dark blue graduation cap and gown. He is smiling broadly, showing his teeth, and looking towards the camera. The background is out of focus, showing what appears to be a bright outdoor setting.

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sees it differently, and his father's journey largely informs that opinion. Mendoza's father was a high school dropout, but he ended up joining the Air Force and then going on to earn a degree and become — of all things — a high school principal in El Paso ISD for 25 years.

"The philosophy behind the Alpha Initiative is to never prejudice," Mendoza says. "Research shows that students who survive these struggles early on typically deal with problems later in life better than those who never had to face similar obstacles."

The caveat is that many of these kids need intervention and support to weather their storms. No doubt, most of them don't have it easy and never did. What the Alpha Initiative offers is hope and effective tools to roll over, skirt around or bulldoze through any and all bumps in the road.

"One of the most important things we teach is that, 'OK, there's a barrier. Don't let it stop you. Together, we can get past this,'" Mendoza says. "'Keep going!'"

It's a message that has been received by the community more warmly than expected, given that only a few years ago some wayward El Paso ISD employees were chasing some of these same kids out of school to improve test scores.

"Have we run into resistance out there?" Mendoza says. "Yes. Of course."

He even cautioned Alpha team members that they

should expect angry parents, possibly even violent outbursts.

But it hasn't happened. A few chilly receptions? Yes. But violence? Not once.





"Is the resistance insurmountable?" Mendoza asks. "No. It takes effort. It takes tenacity. Mostly it takes not taking 'no' for an answer.

"The community members and the kids have been glad to see us once they realize that we're there to help," he says. "The credibility that we've set up as a team is based on 'We are not here to eliminate you. We are not here to judge you. We are here to bring you back in.'"


It helps that some parents know that Mendoza and other Alpha Initiative members played a role in identifying and exposing the district's scandal. It helps too to know that he has been an unwavering advocate for these kids for years — long before the recent mess took place.

"Kids need to know that someone cares," Mendoza says. "They need to know that someone wants to know how they're doing, so barrier removal is the key to getting kids back in. You can't make a difference in the life of a student if that student isn't with you."

**BOBBY HAWTHORNE** is the author of "Longhorn Football" and "Home Field," both published by The University of Texas Press. In 2005, he retired as director of academics for the University Interscholastic League.

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## Greenville ISD

# District has the community seeing red — and it's not what you'd expect

by Autumn Rhea Carpenter



Superintendent  
Donald Jefferies

In today's world, perception is everything. For school systems that receive an academically unacceptable rating from the Texas Education Agency (TEA), public confidence sinks fast. When Greenville ISD received this rating in one subject area and weathered a lackluster football season, teachers, faculty and students were despondent and community spirit was at an all-time low. But thanks to a media-savvy district employee, this negative outlook was reversed, and all it took was a red T-shirt.

Educating the community about how the TEA rating system works and that the district showed successful performances within the majority of the standardized rating system had proven challenging using traditional communications tactics.



Kelli Tharp

"I used the standard tactics, such as press releases and articles, to try to overcome the negative press resulting from the unacceptable rating," recalls Kelli Tharp, director of community services. "Nothing worked. We were stuck with that label for the next two years."

Then, in the fall of 2011, Tharp, who worked in corporate communications prior to public education, awoke from a dream with the words "Spread the Red" in her mind. These words would become the slogan that would transform the morale of her district and community.

"I decided to stop working on the defense and start using a more positive strategy," she says.

"'Spread the Red' is a campaign for our children," Tharp continues. "It's a campaign to upraise their spirits, rejoice in their victories and blaze their successes. It is a campaign to harmonize our collective voice and show pride in our schools, our educators and our community. It is a venue to sing the story of Greenville ISD."

Even with a world champion high school robotics team, 2012 Solar Car Challenge participants and impressive UIL academic competition track records, the district's reputation had suffered. "Spread the Red" provided a vehicle to promote the district's successes and regain community support.

Tharp envisioned a marketing campaign with the "Spread the Red" slogan printed in white letters across the front of red T-shirts along with the dis-

trict's mascot and website, [www.spreadthered.org](http://www.spreadthered.org). She pitched the simple concept to Superintendent Donald Jeffries, who quickly approved the idea, and an initial 1,000 shirts were ordered.

"When we launched the 'Spread the Red' campaign, I asked each building principal to buy the shirts for their staff," Tharp says. "They did so eagerly and we garnered immediate internal support."

Each of the campuses then sold shirts on open house nights.

"We sold the shirts almost at cost. I didn't want this to be a fundraiser, but a pure brand reimagining initiative," says Tharp, adding that this year order forms were sent home with every student and the new shirt design was advertised through normal media outlets.

Greenville ISD students, staff and the community soon were wearing the shirts proudly, and two subsequent orders were placed to keep up with the campaign's popularity.

"Dozens of families bought shirts for the entire family, and people still walk into our office off the street to buy shirts," Tharp says. "Next year I plan to sell the shirts at athletic and fine arts events as well."

Two local banks, a dentist and a few restaurants showed their community support by purchasing the shirts for their employees. The shirts have become a popular fashion statement on spirit days at the district's five elementary schools, sixth grade center, middle school and high school. The shirts were even a wardrobe staple for Greenville students and faculty who traveled to Europe.

"I've seen a 75-year-old woman and a teenager both wearing the T-shirt," says Tharp. "It's surprising how race, socio-economics and politics are forgotten when you see someone wearing our shirt. This campaign has helped people see past their differences and come together as a community."

The "Spread the Red" slogan also provided Greenville ISD with a more cohesive framework for branding and marketing among all schools.

"Before we launched this branding plan, every school had its own marketing materials, and communications were very disjointed," admits Tharp.



Lisa Hill (right) of Hunt Regional Medical Center stands with Laura Carter, Greenville ISD director of transportation. Hunt Regional Medical Center supported the district's "Spread the Red" advertising program when it purchased four bus advertisements, a series of email blast advertisements, ad space in a district-published brochure and several website sponsorships.

### From marketing to making money

Leveraging the momentum from the T-shirt campaign, Tharp expanded the effort to include a paid advertising program whose proceeds help to offset state funding shortages. The goals are to help Greenville ISD maintain healthy financial stability, alleviate program reductions, and to continue to place dollars directly into classrooms, programs and facilities.

The school district created an advertising rate card with consistent pricing that offers advertising opportunities in or on:

- school buses,
- iPad covers,
- school-generated brochures,
- school calendars,
- e-blasts to Greenville ISD employees and
- the district's website.

The program also offers local businesses sponsorship opportunities and short-term naming rights of the football and baseball fields and basketball gymnasium.

"School systems have to start getting creative in their marketing efforts," says Tharp. "Our advertising initiative not only helped Greenville ISD, it offered visual positioning and branding opportunities to local businesses."

Since launching the advertising initiative in May, Greenville ISD has banked almost \$70,000.

"A local car dealership paid \$25,000 to name the Greenville football stadium for three years," says

Superintendent Donald Jefferies. "That shows that even though our football program is struggling, the community support is strong."

Greenville ISD also joined forces with School Spirit Pays, powered by First Data Corp., the world's largest credit processor. Businesses that accept credit and debit cards can use School Spirit Pays to process credit and debit transactions. Every month, 25 percent of those sales are donated in the business' name to support schools in the community.

Greenville ISD also is building positive business relationships in the community. For instance, a local Mexican restaurant offers discounts to customers who wear "Spread the Red" shirts in the restaurant. As the district's 2012-2013 "Spread the Red" sponsor, the restaurant also sells the shirts in its foyer.

This type of partnership is not isolated, and the district has several other businesses that can tell similar stories of how they now help make the advertising campaign a success.

"Districts larger than Greenville with active marketing components have not raised almost \$70,000 in a school year," says Jefferies. "That kind of funding is a teacher's salary; this campaign has so much potential."

This past June, Greenville ISD received a national award for its comprehensive advertising campaign. The district was one of only seven Texas districts to receive a Golden Achievement Award from the National School Public Relations Association.

See GREENVILLE on page 31



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Third, fourth and fifth graders and faculty at Lamar Elementary in Greenville ISD proudly wear their "Spread the Red" shirts on designated spirit days.

GREENVILLE continued from page 29

Offering local companies a specific demographic is another perk to the advertising initiative. This program allows local businesses to tailor their messages to the district's 600 employees for an inexpensive rate.

"The businesses are loving the chance to reach an educated, targeted audience," says Jefferies, adding that the campaign also encourages the community to shop locally.

With the initiative in motion, Tharp is working to enhance the Greenville ISD website.

"Our main goal is to show our students and staff doing their very best," says Tharp. "We are improv-

ing our website and using social media to promote all the good that Greenville ISD has to offer."

Adds Jefferies: "We live in a time when it's our obligation to promote our successes and do a better job of sharing what our educators and students are accomplishing in public schools. Our campaign is the vehicle for this kind of positive publicity and a great communications model that other school districts could easily implement. It all starts with a catchy slogan."



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## Hereford ISD

# Health Science Technology Education offers real-world experience, skills

by John Egan



Superintendent  
Kelli Moulton

Brady Moberley envisions working someday in an air ambulance as a flight medic/nurse. His career ambition became much clearer to him while attending Hereford High School in the Texas Panhandle. For four years, Moberley took part in the high school's Health Science Technology Education program, which prepares students for advanced studies and careers in health care. The program combines classroom instruction with experience in real-world settings.

Through the Hereford High School program, Moberley was able to volunteer during his junior and senior years with Hereford EMS. Simultaneously — and apart from his high school coursework — he completed an EMT-Basic course at Amarillo College and earned his certification as an EMT.

"I liked everything about the program," the 18-year-old Moberley admits, "but the part that was my favorite were the clinicals at various health care locations around the community. Being able to work with and learn from doctors and nurses while in high school was a wonderful opportunity."

For Moberley, the opportunity to help save lives as a flight medic/nurse is knocking ever louder. With an eye toward a bachelor's degree in nursing, he enrolled at Texas Tech University after graduating in 2012 from Hereford High. At the same time, he is employed by Hereford EMS. Moberley says the Hereford program was "the perfect opportunity to get my foot in the door."

Hereford High School's Health Science Technology Education program has opened the door for hundreds of students to pursue careers in health care — one of the fastest-growing job sectors in the U.S. economy.

The school launched the program nearly 20 years ago. Since then, hundreds of thousands of students like Moberley have gone through the program. The program's courses include Principles of Health Science, Health Science I, Medical Terminology (taught online) and a two-year practicum that provides nursing assistant certification along with hands-on clinical experience in more than 10 medical fields.

The high school's program is built on:

- employment needs of the health care sector;
- National Healthcare Skill Standards, which set expectations for people getting ready to work in health care;

- students' individual needs;
- health care leadership and technical skills; and
- post-secondary education requirements.



Michelle  
DeLozier

Michelle DeLozier, career and technical education director for Hereford ISD, says the program's certified nursing assistant (CNA) component was resurrected during the 2011-2012 school year after several years of dormancy. Last year, 27 Hereford students received the CNA designation. This year, most of the 41 students in the Health Science Practicum I are on track to become CNAs.

Hereford ISD Superintendent Kelli Moulton says career and technical offerings like the Health Science Technology Education program should reflect the needs and expectations of the community.

"Districts should invest in the perspectives of the parents, business owners and local leaders to generate programs that enhance the strengths and answer the needs of the community," Moulton says.

Indeed, people trained in health care careers will play a critical role in the future of Texas and the rest of America. As the federal health care reform law continues to roll out and baby boomers grow older, the health care sector is set to explode.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics predicts employment in the health care industry will jump by 29 percent between 2010 and 2020, creating 3.5 million new jobs. Leading the way are registered nurses, accounting for 711,900 new jobs, and home health aides, accounting for 706,300 new jobs. Many of these new jobs will pay well. For instance, the median annual salary of a registered nurse exceeded \$69,000 in 2011, according to the Bureau of Labor Statistics.

A 2012 U.S. Department of Education report underscores the importance of career and technical education in helping employers fill jobs in health care, as well as in technology and advanced manufacturing. Career and technical education represents "a critical investment in our future," the report says.

"Strengthening all aspects of our education system and creating high-quality job training opportunities are necessary to further our economic prosperity as a nation and to keep the American promise alive for all



of our students," the report states. The report adds that students who participate in career and technical education programs "are positioned to become the country's next leaders and entrepreneurs. And they are empowered to pursue future schooling and training as their educational and career needs evolve."

Moulton foresees a "glorious" evolution of career and technical education in Texas, including Hereford High's Health Science Technology Education program. She says conversations with students, parents, business owners and community leaders have demonstrated a need to switch from a "convergent path" of traditional core courses to a "divergent path that honors local control and relevance."

As such, Moulton expects the health science program to expand by incorporating two-year degrees and adding an array of licensing and certification opportunities. Meanwhile, DeLozier looks forward to the possibility of offering EMT-Basic certification for seniors enrolled in the practicum and boosting the availability of job-shadowing prospects for students.

"We would like to give students opportunities and options to help secure their futures in the medical field, which is one of the few that are actually growing and have jobs available," DeLozier says. "We will continue to look at student interests as well as the labor market in our area and at the state and national levels to decide what programs could be most beneficial for our students."

### Positioned for growth

John Peters, a health science teacher at Hereford High, has high hopes for the future of the program as well. Plans are in the works to add a second practicum for seniors. That might require hiring a fourth



John Peters

teacher to help with courses for freshmen and sophomores, says Peters, who is a licensed EMT. For the 2011-2012 school year, registered nurse Karen Fangman joined Peters to teach students in the program. Earlier this year, licensed vocational nurse Kathy Whipple was hired to assist Fangman.

When Peters came aboard at Hereford ISD seven years ago, he was the only teacher in the Health Science Technology Education program, which then had 70 students. Until Fangman and Whipple were hired, Peters had to reject about half of the applicants for the junior and senior practicum courses because he couldn't handle more students by himself. Today, Peters, Fangman and Whipple teach about 220 students.

Fangman says that whether a student is adept at scientific research, clinical laboratory procedures, patient care or communication, health care career options are available to match his or her interests and abilities. The Hereford High program "provides students with opportunities to explore a variety of health careers," she says, "and make realistic and satisfying career choices."

In addition to the expertise offered by Fangman and her colleagues, the program relies on technological teaching tools. In 2007-2008, Peters, who admits he is "sort of a computer geek," set up the HSTE Project. Now all tests and curriculum resources are available online in Wikispaces, and student tests are administered through Moodle, an e-learning software program.

Says Peters: "Both Wikispaces and Moodle are free for educators to use; although, there is some work

*See HEREFORD on page 34*



*Health Science Technology Education student Michelle Martinez (left) checks vital signs of fellow student Chantel Montana as instructor Karen Fangman supervises.*

Health Science  
Technology Education  
instructor Karen Fangman  
(at the head of the bed)  
and Texas Department  
of Aging and Disability  
Services instructor  
Kathy Whipple, LVN,  
lead students who are  
practicing skills that will  
prepare them for the  
Certified Nurse's Aide  
certification exam.



HEREFORD continued from page 33

involved and there is a learning curve — just as with any new software or Web 2.0 tool.”

Of course, all students in Hereford High’s Health Science Technology Education program face some sort of learning curve. But for those students who complete the program and decide against heading to college, there are high-quality, high-paying entry-level jobs in the medical field awaiting them, DeLozier says. For those students who do enroll in college, they can begin their higher education equipped with knowledge, skills and perhaps even a health care certification. Moberley fits into the latter category.

Earlier this year, the Hereford High graduate told the *Amarillo Globe-News* that emergency medicine was his passion and health science was his favorite academic subject. Why health science?

“I love learning about the medical field and being able to help people in their biggest time of need on a daily basis,” he said.

Says Superintendent Moulton: “The voice of the students can guide program development by allowing our emerging leaders of the community to help shape the needs for their future.”



**JOHN EGAN** is a freelance writer and the former editor of the *Austin Business Journal*.

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# Parent involvement center strengthens families to strengthen students

by Raven L. Hill

Araceli Soto never forgot what it was like for her, growing up with newly immigrated parents who didn't even know that their daughter needed to be in school, much less how to help her with homework.

Now a bilingual education teacher in Lake Dallas ISD, Soto launched an ESL Parent Involvement Center at Lake Dallas Elementary School so that other children would have better opportunities for success.

The program has resulted in more English-speaking parents, more fathers engaged in the center's activities and additional centers at three Lake Dallas schools, including the high school. The centers offer workshops that are designed to educate parents on various topics, including literacy, communication styles, conflict resolution and technology literacy. Sometimes these topics are addressed by guest speakers. Workshops are held during lunch on school days, weekday evenings and Saturdays. Child care usually is provided.

In the first year, 22 parents participated at the Lake Dallas Elementary center. Last year, there were 45. This year there are about 70 participants across three campuses.

Officials say that students with Limited English Proficiency (LEP) whose parents are involved in the program achieve grade-level reading and comprehension by the end of the school year.

Though the overall goal is to support student success, the programming goes beyond the classroom, creating environs that nurture stable, healthy families. Parents can use the knowledge and skills learned in the technology class to search for jobs. There also is a clothing room, offering donated items for children and adults. Recently, some participants organized aerobics classes at one center.

The focus on the entire family is another nod to Soto's childhood years.

"My parents fought a lot. They were constantly separated. I had several gaps in my education," she admits. "When you have a healthy relationship in a home, you have kids who have a healthy environment to learn."

## Changing demographics

Lake Dallas is a growing resort community located north of Dallas/Fort Worth. The Denton County district's changing demographics provided fertile

ground for the creation of the Parent Involvement Center. Since 2000, Lake Dallas ISD, which has 4,090 students, experienced an increase in Hispanic student enrollment — from 8.4 percent to 22.3 percent. The percentage of LEP students has more than doubled during that same period, from 2.2 percent to 5.7 percent.

Demographics were shifting even more rapidly at Lake Dallas Elementary: The school's Hispanic enrollment was 10.5 percent in 2000. Last year, it was 30.1 percent. The LEP population increased from 2.8 percent to 14.4 percent over the past decade.

"We were very aware that we were going to have to do things differently, not only with our students but with our parents," says Superintendent Gayle Stinson. "I was excited that our campus leadership saw a need and figured out how to meet that need for our students and parents."

## Getting started

Experts tout the benefits of parental involvement in positioning students for academic success. A study by the Urban Institute in 2010 attributed lower rates of parental involvement among Latin American immigrants to socioeconomic status and language and cultural barriers between parents and school personnel.

The study suggested using strategies that directly target parents' behaviors and schools' approaches to parental involvement or to indirectly target parental involvement by addressing the constraining factors, such as language barriers or lack of education.

The Parent Involvement Center includes elements of both strategies.

Soto started the early literacy program, which served as the foundation for the center, about seven years ago at Lake Dallas Primary School. (The program continued at Lake Dallas Elementary when the primary school closed.) She had been working with an ESL program at her church and realized that a similar program could benefit parent volunteers at the school.



Deon Quisenberry

She approached then-Principal Deon Quisenberry, who said he was thrilled about the prospect.



Superintendent Gayle Stinson

See LAKE DALLAS on page 36



Parent Involvement Center instructors Denise Evans-Jackson (standing at left) and Araceli Soto (standing at right) lead an English as a second language class. The curriculum incorporates learning software, which the parent-students access on iPad computers.



LAKE DALLAS continued from page 35

"The premise behind the whole thing is that stronger families make stronger students," he says. "That's become true in every aspect."

The parent involvement centers utilize existing staff and facilities, so no additional funds are required to run the program.

Soto recalls that at the very first Parental Involvement Center workshop she asked attendees — mostly stay-at-home mothers — to raise their hands if they read to their children. None raised their hands, even when she asked if they read to them in Spanish. She then asked how many of them played with their children. Again, none raised their hands. Soto also observed that many of their children were unable to speak in full sentences; some simply pointed to what they wanted. Moreover, the children showed poor behavior skills, often running around the room during the workshops.

"I told the parents, 'You are your child's first teacher. You show your kids how to walk, how to talk and you will show them a lot of things through play,'" Soto says.

When a student mentioned that her father didn't want to read with her and her sister, Soto invited the father to attend the early literacy class. When she

learned that he and his wife were having problems at home, she suggested they attend the couples' communication course.

She saw a change in the father after he finished the class.

"That class helped them come together as a family," says Soto. "After that, he was more committed to the family. He began to read with the little girls. Even if it was just for a moment, for that child it was a great success."

The program's success led Quisenberry to bring it to Corinth Elementary, where he became the principal this year. So far, seven parents have enrolled in the program — three Korean, three Spanish and one Russian. They work on learning English and computer skills. Two parents have children who attend other schools in the district; they heard about the program and came to Corinth for assistance.



Jennifer Perry

"We're willing to help any parent who needs help," he says. "When I was at Lake Dallas Elementary, we invited parents over the entire district to come."

New Lake Dallas Elementary Principal Jennifer Perry says she gained a greater appreciation for the center once she saw it in action.

"Visitors from other schools come to look and see what's happening," she says. "Parents use that outreach also as an opportunity not only for them to learn but to help others in the community."

Perry expects the program to reach all five Lake Dallas campuses, covering more topics and attracting more people.

## Resources

"Helping Your Children With Homework, U.S. Department of Education, [www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/homework/index.html](http://www.ed.gov/parents/academic/help/homework/index.html)

The Parenting Center in Fort Worth, [www.theparentingcenter.org](http://www.theparentingcenter.org)

'The premise behind the whole thing is that stronger families make stronger students. That's become true in every aspect.'

— Deon Quisenberry, principal,  
Corinth Elementary School

"I think we will have a larger district group that has satellite units on each campus that will continue to grow in their own way to meet their needs," Perry says. She advises educators who are interested in starting similar programs to start small. "Let it grow itself."

Social activities, such as potluck meals and recognition ceremonies, are equally important in retaining parents, says Quisenberry. He also suggests looking in-depth at logistical and technological needs, along with communication tools to provide information to the community.

But Stinson says the most important requirement is what she sees in Quisenberry and Soto: passion.

"They made it happen. You have to be committed to the cause, not only as an educational leader but as a person. They believe in what they do and they want it to be successful for those kids and those families," she says.


Speaking on behalf of the school board, Stinson adds: "We stand behind what they've done, what they are doing and what we continue to do as a district. And we're their biggest cheerleaders."

Having grown up in the Lake Dallas community, the superintendent says the program strikes a personal chord.

"I went to school in this district. I've watched our community grow and change over the years," she says. "To see our staff, parents and teachers committed so passionately to our children and our community makes me really proud to be a Falcon."

For Soto, whose parents divorced when she was 16, the center gives other families a fighting chance.

"I really wish someone had done this for my family," she says. "Every time I help someone, it helps me heal those difficult situations I faced."

 **RAVEN L. HILL** is a freelance writer and former education reporter for the *Austin American-Statesman*.

*Instructor Denise Evans-Jackson (standing) engages both parents and their children in learning exercises at the Parent Involvement Center.*



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# District puts cutting-edge technology into hands of all students at all schools

by Raven L. Hill

The future of McAllen ISD started about two years ago with a single question: Do we have a 21st century learning environment?

It is a question that Superintendent James Ponce considered thoughtfully and strategically. He posed the question to every stakeholder group in the 25,000-student district in the Rio Grande Valley.

After months of discussion, the district and community rallied around what is now called the TLC<sup>3</sup> initiative: Transforming Learning in the Classroom, Campus and Community. The initiative has resulted in students and teachers at all 32 schools receiving an iPad or iPod Touch — at no additional expense to the district.

All students in grades three through 12 received the iPad 2. Students in kindergarten through second grade received an iPod Touch. The \$20 million program is believed to be the largest iPad program in any school district nationwide.

The initiative is designed to foster higher levels of student engagement, innovation and creativity. Officials hope that students will embrace technology and cultivate skills for the global workforce.

McAllen ISD has received extensive media coverage since the rollout began. Moreover, the Board of Trustees was named Outstanding School Board by the Texas Association of School Administrators, and TLC<sup>3</sup> was cited as a select accomplishment.

One look at its student demographics and McAllen ISD might be an unexpected technological pioneer. Almost 70 percent of students come from families with low income. However, officials say student demographics is precisely what created a sense of urgency around the initiative.



Carmen Garcia

"We didn't want a group of students to go through our system without having access to this technology," says Carmen Garcia, director of educational technology.

Superintendent Ponce adds: "We realized we couldn't take five years as initially anticipated. We decided to try to make it in three years. In the end, that turned into 18 months."

Approximately 6,800 iPads were distributed to stu-

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Superintendent James Ponce



McAllen ISD Superintendent James Ponce watches the classroom come alive as students engage in learning with their new iPads.

McAllen ISD students benefit from the TLC<sup>3</sup> initiative, which put iPods and iPads into the hands of students at all 32 schools in the district.



McALLEN continued from page 39

dents last year. The remaining devices were issued this fall.

"We're moving at a good speed," says Ponce, who emphasizes that distributing technology tools to faculty and students is only the beginning.

Billie McConnell is the director of K-12 professional development at ACU Connected Consulting, which is affiliated with Abilene Christian University. The university is providing professional development for TLC<sup>3</sup>.

"It takes time, but you are going to see more student-centered classrooms that allow students the opportunity to develop skills beyond just basic knowledge," McConnell says. "You will see classrooms that are engaging and relevant to students where they have the opportunity to develop problem-solving skills, to be innovative, to learn to collaborate and to develop ways to communicate at a high level and in multiple ways."

District officials trace the program's foundation to discussions that took place during a series of vision meetings among students, teachers, parents and staff that began in February 2011. Parent Mari Cruz Abbott attended those meetings.

"It was really like a community that came together and started to consider the direction we could go," says Abbott. Her son, a middle school student, was in the first rollout of devices; her daughter, who is in high school, received an iPad this fall.

When asked to describe her ideas about 21st century learning, her words came easily: "To me, it's an approach to teaching and learning that incorporates the different disciplines and gives children the ability to develop skills for the future — where they are collaborating and being creative and we are empowering them to be independent and ultimately lifelong learners."

Abbott admits she had some reservations about TLC<sup>3</sup> at first because it was so different from business as usual in the district. Observing her son's academic experience, however, has helped to ease her concerns.

"My son and his school have really embraced it," she says. "As the days go by, I see it being a positive thing. I see these experiences helping him to get ready for high school, be successful and college-ready, and all those things we hope for."

Launching the program required different things from different groups. School board members had to communicate the vision to the community. District administrators had to get buy-in from teachers.

Getting students and parents on board was the easiest part, Garcia says.

"Parents want the best for their children. When we outlined the goals, vision and objectives, they were thrilled and excited because everyone knew the system wasn't working as well as it should. We're moving from the three Rs to the four Cs: communication, collaboration, creativity and critical thinking."

The superintendent's idea of a 21st century learning environment is not dependent on the four walls of the traditional brick-and-mortar school, nor does it ignore accountability standards.

"We're not leaving behind that students need to be successful on state accountability exams," Ponce says. "We're working in an environment that wants to take care of both simultaneously, not one at the expense of the other."

### Seeds for success

An iPad initiative of this magnitude would be cost-prohibitive for many districts to replicate. Only 600 districts nationwide are using iPads in some capacity. However, McAllen ISD was able to cover 100 percent of the costs through repurposing existing funds and

tapping a combination of federal funds and private donations. The costs include \$12.1 million for the devices and apps, \$6.5 million for infrastructure and \$1.2 million for professional development, according to the district.

The major challenge, Garcia says, was getting the devices to students quickly, even though the district ended up ahead of the projected timetable.

"Getting 25,000 devices to kids takes time. We do have purchasing procedures and policies in place," he says.

Experts point to several advantages of a digital learning environment, such as savings on textbooks and cost savings related to increased teacher attendance and lower student discipline rates.

McConnell of Abilene Christian University admits that TLC<sup>3</sup> has presented both successes and challenges.

"The success is seeing how teachers are using the technology to help students make connections to their learning and to think about how the classroom can be engaging and relevant," he says. "The challenge is to get everyone to 'buy-in' to the vision and to understand that the program is not about using technology to do the same things, but to use technology to allow students to collaborate, communicate, think and create."

He advises districts that are considering similar initiatives to start with formulating a shared vision.

"If you do not define the vision, the skills that you want students to develop and the type of classroom that you want, then you will end up spending money on technology that will create no change," McConnell says.


Ponce adds that finding the right people to help with visioning is key. Those people would be experts outside the district who can help get the momentum going, communicating with the community at every step of the way and ensuring that the district's infrastructure supports the goals.

"You have to first envision what you want to do. Anchor it in those who will be able to pull it through for you," Ponce says.

He gives a lot of credit to school board members: "It takes a lot of courage from the board. They do a lot of work behind the scenes. They are a big part of making sure that something like this is successful."

The initiative is not only changing the school district, but it is impacting families and the community at large, Garcia says. The iPads are providing families with access to information, collaboration tools and communication. Businesses even are developing apps to make sure faculty and students have access to teaching products and services.

"The entire community is moving into the 21st century," Garcia says. "The transformation is just beginning."

 **RAVEN L. HILL** is a freelance writer and a former education reporter for the *Austin American-Statesman*.



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# Small district in West Texas creates world-class transportation call center

by Ford Gunter

Every school day in Texas, almost 40,000 school buses take more than 1.6 million students to and from public and charter schools in more than 1,000 districts.

"When you have your kids in a secure location, in a building, on campus, it's fine," says Mike Almuina, assistant director of transportation at Midland ISD. "The liability goes through the roof once you put them on the road with traffic."

All 200 of Midland ISD's buses have to use the interstate system to cover a 36-campus, 700-square-mile area in the wide-open West Texas prairie.

"They share the road with 18-wheelers," Almuina says. "The safety of our children is the biggest issue."

This mindset has led to multiple innovative technology upgrades at the district's Transportation Call Center that have since attracted the attention of much larger districts — and even large businesses in the corporate sector — that are interested in replicating this West Texas district's successes.

One of the upgrades Midland ISD implemented allows transportation staff to track buses and other fleet vehicles via LIVE! GPS. The system enables

eight work stations at the call center to see the exact whereabouts of every bus in the fleet in real time via two large display monitors at the front of the room.

Before Almuina came to Midland ISD in 2008, the district's transportation call center operated much like any other in the state. It struggled to spread the burden of 400 calls a day across small, individual offices.

"The little offices were not efficient," says Almuina. "To talk to each other, the employees would have to run down the hall or call on the phone, or sometimes if they were on the phone, write a little note. When you have 400 vehicles out in the field, you need to be able to respond. You need everybody on the same page."

Almuina came from a private-sector company that ran transportation for school districts.

"In the private sector, we don't have a lot of room for error," he says. "Those exceptions are very costly."

With recommendations from Almuina, the Midland Transportation Department quickly set about making changes. The first step was to assign students



Superintendent  
Ryder Warren

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*Assistant Transportation Director Mike Almuina mans the district's state-of-the-art call center, which enables school vehicles and transportation support staff to be in direct contact at all times.*

to specific buses, reducing the time students spent searching for buses with empty seats and shuffling seats to make sure everyone fit. The district also remodeled an existing room at central administration to create an open-floor, eight-station call center that opened in March of this year. Already, the Transportation Department has seen a drop in the number of calls.

The old call center also utilized GPS and on-board video to record incidents on the bus, but not to the fullest extent of the technologies.

"The GPS tracking system we have now is not a passive system," says Almuina. "It's live. You can see everything live. If a campus calls looking for a bus, you can tell them, 'Hey, he's two blocks away.'"

The new call center also has led to drastic improvements in response time.

"We can instantly dispatch a bus to cover where additional help is needed," Almuina says.

The same holds true for Midland ISD's 200 maintenance vehicles.

"If we need plumbers or a carpenter for an emergency, we can see where those vehicles are at any given time," he says.

A dramatic example of the new call center at work happened one morning in late September when sudden flooding marooned a bus without any other buses in the area to assist. The call center notified Midland ISD Police Department Chief David Colburn, who received step-by-step, turn-by-turn directions to the stranded bus from a call center operator. Using LIVE! GPS tracking, the operator could inform Colburn when and where the bus moved to higher ground while he was en route.

Midland also has cameras on every bus to provide near-instant access to video and audio of any accidents or incidents that happen on buses, including bullying. If cameras catch a possible bullying incident, the relevant footage is sent electronically from the call center to the involved students' campus and the district police department. Bus drivers also have the capability of electronically marking the tape as the incident happens to provide instant access.

"All these things happen simultaneously," Almuina says. "In the more severe cases, the (Midland) Police Department gets it immediately. The police have laptops in their vehicles. They can access the video from their vehicles."

Perhaps the most remarkable aspect of all of this is that the new call center only cost \$35,000, and the retrofit to create a call center added zero dollars to the annual budget.

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*Pre-trip inspections are part of Midland ISD Transportation Department's best practices. Pictured is bus driver Brian Horn.*

"We agreed to purchase one less vehicle for the 2011-2012 school year," Almuina explains. "If it were necessary, I can use my (school-owned) four-door Ford F250 Super Cab for maintenance support. We can put a utility bed in it if we need to."

More upgrades are on the books for January, when Zonar technology will begin tracking and timing the stops of each bus to improve route efficiency. Z-Pass also will scan each student's school-issued ID as they board and exit the buses. Parents who subscribe to

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'When parents know that you're doing everything you can to take care of their children — and they do put them in our trust — they are very happy that we're doing these things.'

— Mike Almuina, assistant director of transportation, Midland ISD

Z-Pass then will be notified with a location immediately via text message every time their children board or exit a bus.

Almuina says: "I have a little one. If you want to know if your kid got home, especially if your kid has to get on more than one bus — and some of the rural routes we have to do connectors — then Z-Pass is it."

Almuina says he is optimistic about the launch. He expects about half of the parents of pre-kindergarten to fourth grade students will decide that the estimated 10 cents a day it will cost them to receive the texts is worth it.

"When parents know that you're doing everything you can to take care of their children — and they do put them in our trust — they are very happy that we're doing these things," he says.

In the coming years, Almuina hopes his call center will trim 12 percent from the Transportation Department's annual \$8 million budget.

"When you're being efficient, the financial cost goes down," he says. "I consider that a surplus that goes right back to the classroom."

Maintaining that efficiency will be challenging. Fueled by a strong energy sector, Midland's economy is comparatively strong, and the public school popu-

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lation is growing by 1,200 to 1,500 students a year. Roughly one-fourth of the students ride the buses regularly, but up to 80 percent ride occasionally for sports or academic team travel and special events.

### Setting an example

The district is doing something right, however, because other districts — including very large, very urban districts — are taking notice.

Says Almuina: "It's impressive when a director comes from Houston or I get a phone call from somewhere in New York City and they ask us how we're doing it here."

Word is even trickling back into the private sector, and several oil companies have come by to see if they can glean anything from Midland ISD's call center operations. This is especially complimentary to Almuina and Superintendent Ryder Warren.

"Being in direct competition with our area's gas and oil companies for drivers, we have been able to operate on average around 40 drivers short of optimum staffing," Warren says. "Because many of our routes have been doubled, and in some cases even tripled, the implementation of the call center was a huge win for us."

Given how fast things are evolving, these school districts and other curious companies might need to

keep monthly tabs on Midland ISD's transportation call center. At press time, there was talk of building a routing system into the call center, and Almuina is trying to buy ParentLink services, which would allow the call center to communicate with the parents of the children on a particular bus. If there's a breakdown or delay, parents can be notified by text message immediately.

The call center's new offerings are sitting well with bus drivers, whose jobs are getting easier, and with students, whose commute times are getting shorter.

"It's reduced the amount of time spent on a bus, and that's the goal. They already have eight hours of school," Almuina says.

Midland ISD's transportation team is passionate about the service it provides, which includes offering parents that crucial peace of mind. When there's an overnight trip or one that goes beyond normal business hours, Almuina can pull up the GPS tracking map on his home television to check progress.

"Having the ability to track that," he says, "to pop those buses up on my big screen at the house and know they are safe on the road — that brings peace of mind to all of us."



**FORD GUNTER** is a freelance writer and filmmaker in Houston.

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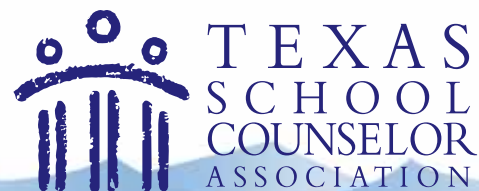
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# District feeds the future with mobile meals delivery program

by Jeff Carmack

"Just because school's out doesn't mean they're not hungry."



Mike Boone

That could be Mike Boone's mantra. Boone is associate director of child nutrition for San Marcos CISD and the main man behind the district's extensive mobile meals program, which brings meals to children and their caregivers when school is not in session.

To give some idea of the scope of the district's challenge, the district has 11 schools and about 74 percent of its students qualify for free and reduced-price meals, according to Boone. In a couple of schools about 84 percent of the students qualify.

For years, the district has participated in the traditional National School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch and Breakfast Program. In 2009, the district added lunchtime meals at two off-campus sites — Rio Vista Pavilion and the Redwood Baptist Church — serving an additional 5,000 meals that year. The district expanded its offerings again this past summer with a third off-campus feeding site at Martindale City Park.

According to Boone, campuses that hold summer school also feed free lunches to kids. This includes the district's sole high school, one of two middle schools and two elementary schools. The meal program is an extension of the National School Breakfast Program and the National School Lunch Program's Seamless Summer Feeding Program, which is funded by the U.S. Department of Agriculture.

However, even with all these off-campus and summertime initiatives, Boone and his staff saw they weren't feeding all the hungry kids in the district during the summer. Many of the students had no way to get to the feeding sites.

"A lot of these kids, their folks don't even have a car," Boone says. "Like in Morning Wood trailer park — that's a 10-mile drive."

Out of this challenge was born the district's mobile meals program.

Gearing up for 2011-2012, Boone started looking for a way to bring the meals to students who weren't in summer school, but qualified for free or reduced-

price meals. That's when he got the idea for mobile meals.

He approached his boss, Superintendent Mark Eads, with the idea of taking meals on the road, and Eads couldn't agree fast enough.

"When he came to me and talked about this project, all he had to say was, 'This is good for our kids,'" Eads says. "I told him, 'This makes a lot of sense; let's run with it.'"

With Eads' go-ahead, Boone started looking for a bus to make his dream come true.

Boone acquired an old bus and proceeded to install air-conditioning, tint the windows, and paint it with the school's Rattler colors — purple and white — with some fangs and rattles, to boot. To transform the bus into a food truck, he took out several seats to make room for kitchen equipment and a small dining area, and then it was ready to roll.

Boone, who has a degree in hotel restaurant management from Western Kentucky University and ran restaurants for more than a decade, is no stranger to



Superintendent Mark Eads

See SAN MARCOS on page 50



*San Marcos CISD serves up hot and cold meals to children who aren't in summer school and cannot get to off-campus feeding sites due to transportation issues.*

restaurant operations. When the chance came along to work in school nutrition 17 years ago in Duval Co., Fla., he took it and never looked back. His time since then, overseeing student nutritional needs in Corpus Christi, Houston and now San Marcos, has been an eye-opener.

"This area is unbelievable," he says of San Marcos CISD. "For instance, the Rancho Vista area is probably at 50 percent unemployment, and 90 percent of students are on free and reduced-price meals. So there's lots of needy kids who are probably not getting a hot meal every day.

"We serve around 60 to 70 meals a day at five stops," he says. "We prepare the meals at school, load food in coolers and warmers and hit the road. We pull up to a feeding site, the kids jump on and eat, then they clean up their trash and we're off to the next site."

During the summer, the meals they get on the bus may be the only good meals they get all day, Boone says. "They can't get to us, so we get to them."

Funding for the district's free lunch program comes mainly from the federal government.

"We're 99.96 percent USDA funded," Boone says, "so whatever happens in Austin (at the Capitol) doesn't affect us. We also get about \$250,000 worth of federal commodities."

It probably goes without saying that the program is a huge success and wildly popular. "The community loves it," Boone says. "We've had only positive responses."

While Boone is a life-changer for many San Marcos CISD school kids, he is also a life saver. One morning in October, the bus had just started serving breakfast when a child ran up to Boone with his hands around his throat. The boy was choking on a piece of food.

'They can't get to us, so we get to them.'

— Mike Boone,  
associate director of  
child nutrition,  
San Marcos CISD

Boone says he spun the kid around and banged on his back. When that didn't work, "I knew it was Heimlich time," Boone says.

Boone wrapped his arms around the boy ("a sixth grader — a big ol' boy — it was hard to get my arms around him") and gave him a mighty squeeze and then another and then a third. Finally the student coughed up a bolus of food "about the size of a golf ball."

"I've been in food service for 30 years, and I've never had to do that," he says. "I was more shook up than the kid. I told him, 'I may have saved you from choking, but I think I'm gonna have a heart attack.'"

"Never a dull moment in San Marcos CISD," he says.

Superintendent Eads rode on a mobile meals route with Boone, his crew and a handful of other community leaders one day and witnessed firsthand how the district's mobile meals bus is received in the community.

"I want to tell you, it was one of those 'good-bad' feelings. It broke your heart and made you feel good at the same time," Eads says.

According to the superintendent, at some stops "there would be whole families — parents, grandparents, kids — waiting. And they would literally be jumping up and down knowing we were coming."

One of the other passengers on the ride-along that day had a personal reaction to what he saw.

Eads recalls of this gentleman: "His mom had been a single parent, and he said that many a day while growing up he had nothing but a bowl of cereal for lunch, and he realized how much he himself would have benefited from such a program. He was literally in tears."

"I say we're feeding the future," Boone says. One of the students getting a hot meal from the Rattler "may be the person who cures cancer or AIDS or first sets foot on Mars. You never know."



To distinguish it on the street, the mobile meals bus is painted purple and white — school colors — complete with fangs and eyes to reflect the school mascot: the Rattlers.

 **JEFF CARMACK** is a freelance writer in Austin.





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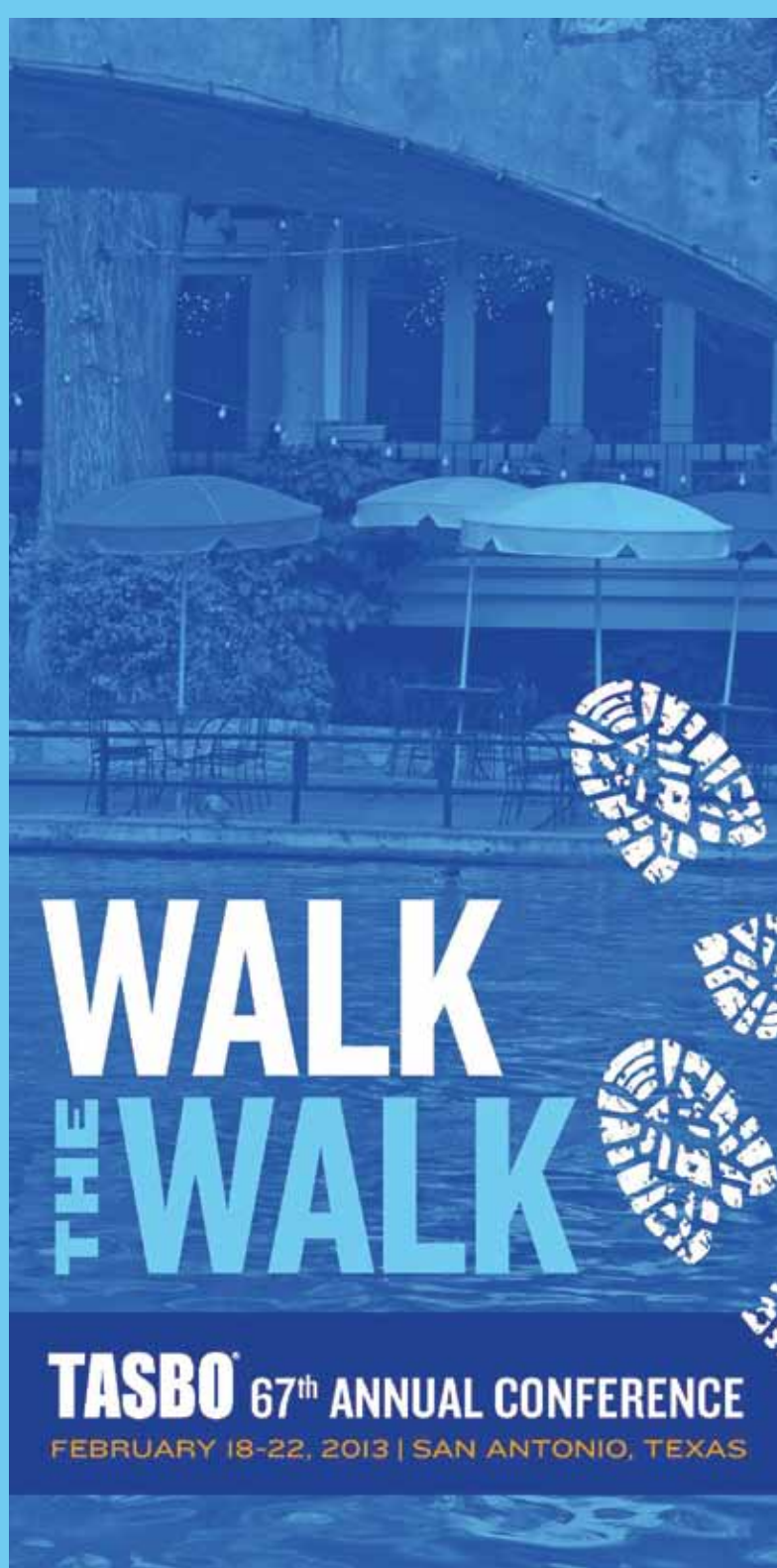
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