

My name is Daniel King. I am Superintendent of the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District, located on the Texas-Mexico border in the Rio Grande Valley of Texas. I have been fortunate to be involved in two highly successful school district turnarounds.

The first case was the Hidalgo Independent School District, with 3,000 (plus) students. There I worked as part of a team (Superintendent my final 8 years in that district) that transformed a historically low-performing school district, once ranked among the worst (bottom 5%) in Texas into a high performing school district that has developed a reputation for excellence at the state and national levels. The most unique component of this transformation was the conversion of the district's high school, into an Early College High School for all students, and the entire school district into an Early College School District. Hidalgo High School has consistently ranked among the best high schools in Texas over the last decade and was ranked #11 in the nation by US News & World Report in 2007. Hidalgo ISD is widely considered one of the best in Texas. This district is comprised almost entirely of Hispanic students from low-income households where Spanish is the primary language. The transformation from "bottom 5%" to a decade of receiving accolades for excellence has been empowering for the entire community.

The second case is very informative due to the pace and scale of change. Pharr-San Juan-Alamo, or PSJA, a 31,000 student school district, with similar demographics to Hidalgo, has made dramatic strides in less than three years. In only two years, the PSJA team has taken a district where every high school was labeled a "drop-out factory" (and failing to meet AYP) reduced the real number and the rate of dropouts by 75%, while increasing the real number of graduates by more than 60%. The drop out rate has plummeted from almost double the state average to less than half the state average. For the first time ever, all campuses and the district have met AYP. Innovations including a dual credit (high school and college) dropout recovery high school that has graduated 517 dropouts and non-graduates (18-26 years old) in 2.5 years, with most earning some college hours before graduation and many continuing on in community college after graduation. In addition, PSJA has used a grant from the Texas High School Project and the Gates Foundation to open a T-STEM Early College High School where students can earn up to 60 college hours (or an Associates Degree) while still in high school. This unique high school was designed to be a laboratory to develop and incubate the concept, while preparing to scale it up to impact all PSJA high schools and spark district transformation. Just last week, Texas Governor Rick Perry and Texas Commissioner of Education Robert Scott came to PSJA to declare the district a state model for district turnarounds and award PSJA a unique \$2,000,000 grant to scale up our bold initiative *All Students College Ready, College Connected*.

Through these two experiences, I have learned the following about school turn-around:

- High Expectations are imperative. It helps to set bold, goals.
- Quality leadership at both the district and campus levels is critical.
- Systemic transformation is the most effective way to impact low performing schools.

- A high school diploma is not the end-goal. Connecting every student to a quality future is. I have found success through connecting students to college while they are still in high school. 21<sup>st</sup> century high schools should be flexibly and seamlessly connected to higher education, with students moving to college level work in each course of study as soon as they are ready. This includes CATE courses.
- Rigor, Relevance, and Relationships (caring about students) are all important. College/Connected Career Pathways add rigor and relevance, allowing and motivating students to move to higher levels of learning.
- Career and Technology (Vocational, Carl Perkins) courses are important for creating viable career pathways for all students. These courses should be industry standard and college connected (dual credit) leading towards certification and/or Associate and Bachelor Degrees.
- Partnerships can accelerate transformation. (ie, Colleges, Community Colleges, Workforce agencies, Foundations, Philanthropists, Economic Development agencies).

#### AYP Challenges:

- The 100% standard.
- Many limited English students need more than one year to perform successfully at grade level in English.
- More support is needed to accelerate success with special education students.
- Only using a four-year graduation rate fails to give credit for those students who go on to graduate in subsequent years, and may have a negative impact on the number of eventual graduates. A sliding scale of graduation rates to include four-year and five-year rates would be better.