



# Back on Track through College in the Rio Grande Valley

From Dropout Recovery to Postsecondary Success

by

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MAKING CHILDREN & FAMILIES THE PRIORITY

Low-income and minority students are rapidly becoming the majority population in public schools across the United States. At the same time, the economy demands that people get more education than ever to succeed in family-sustaining careers. Yet the dropout rate is at crisis proportions among African Americans and Latinos: each year, over 1.2 million mostly low-income and minority students leave high school without a diploma.<sup>1</sup> African-American and Latino/a students drop out of high school at twice the rate of their white peers.<sup>2</sup> For the United States to once again become first in the world in the postsecondary completion and credentials held by its young adults, the needs of this large and growing group must be addressed and their vast potential must be tapped.

The Rio Grande Valley is a microcosm of this population trend: nearly 90% percent of the population is Hispanic,<sup>3</sup> and one-third is considered economically disadvantaged.<sup>4</sup> So it is fitting that the valley is the site of a groundbreaking model for dropout recovery – one that not only graduates former dropouts but transitions them to college – and that model is spreading throughout the region. Launched in 2007 under the leadership of Dr. Daniel King in Pharr-San Juan-Alamo Independent School District, the College, Career, and Technology Academy has graduated almost 1000 former dropouts and off-track youth in five years, a significant percentage of whom attained postsecondary credits before graduating. Through this model, college success is within reach for students who once left school without a diploma or were at high risk of not graduating. And this school is being replicated across the region, as other school districts recognize the promise and potential of recovering this population.

## A Groundbreaking Design for Recovering Dropouts

The College, Career, and Technology Academy (CCTA) engages young people age 18-26 who have either dropped out of school or who have reached the end of their senior year lacking high school credits or having failed the state's high-stakes exit exam. CCTA students – many of whom have been out of school for years – take classes to complete their high school credit requirements and prepare for the state tests; when they are ready, they seamlessly transition into college courses at nearby South Texas College while finishing up their high school requirements.

The school was launched when Dr. King arrived at Pharr-San Juan-Alamo as its new superintendent and decided that his district reform strategy would start in the most unlikely of places – with dropouts. Dr. King has a keen eye for state policy opportunities and noted new Texas legislation enabling school districts to recover dropouts up to age 26 – sparking the idea for a school that would do more than just bring them back. Facing a four-year graduation rate

### Back on Track Through College

*CCTA exemplifies JFF's new school design for off-track and out-of-school youth: Back on Track Through College. This model is based on Jobs for the Future's early college design, through which students take college courses as part of their high school experience. JFF has modified that design for older youth who are significantly behind in skills and credits. Students progress through three phases: Enriched Preparation, which offers high-quality college-ready instruction with academic and social supports; Postsecondary Bridging, which builds college-ready skills and provides informed transition counseling; and First Year Supports, which offers supports in the first year of postsecondary to ensure persistence and success. The Back on Track Through College design makes college achievable for youth who never envisioned college in their future.*

of only 62%, Dr. King approached Dr. Shirley Reed of South Texas College with the idea of launching a school for dropouts that would transition them directly to college.

CCTA builds a college-going culture starting at recruitment -- through, for example, billboards throughout the community that advertise CCTA as a place for young people who didn't finish high school to "start college today." At intake, students not only chart their path to graduation but also register for South Texas College and select the dual enrollment courses they will take once they are eligible. Once enrolled, their schedules includes both on-line credit recovery and academically rigorous and engaging instruction, utilizing strategies designed to accelerate learning among underperforming students so they can tackle and master college material. Teachers use an approach to instruction called the Common Instructional Framework, which underpins all instruction in the district; Jobs for the Future and Educate Texas have led the coaching for this college-ready approach since 2009. Students needing additional reading remediation also participate in smaller groups focused intensively on literacy.

As soon as they pass the exit-level English Language Arts state test, CCTA students are eligible to enroll in a limited selection of South Texas College courses primarily, but not only, in Career and Technical Education. Their options have recently included medical terminology, welding, and business technology, among others. The courses are called "mini-mesters," because they start after the state exit tests are given and are compressed to five weeks. Students also enroll in a South Texas College-sponsored College Success class, given at CCTA, that prepares them for the academic behaviors and provides them with the "college knowledge" that these first-generation college goers are unlikely to get at home – how to read a syllabus, how to navigate the college campus, how to manage a college course load. The college courses provide the hook that enables students to stay on track to graduation and postsecondary success while they complete their remaining credit and test requirements for graduation.

*CCTA utilizes Jobs for the Future's Common Instructional Framework, a set of six instructional strategies used across content areas that create classrooms that allow for powerful learning and powerful teaching and form the basis of a coherent college preparatory curriculum. They give all students of all skill levels access to the complex information needed to meet state and college-ready standards. These instructional strategies succeed because they engage all students as active participants in learning. The Common Instructional Framework strategies - Collaborative Group Work, Writing to Learn, Literacy Circles, Scaffolding, Questioning, and Classroom Talk - are used in every classroom at CCTA, every day.*

*As Principal Linda Carrillo describes it, "From day one, students know that they will be active participants in their learning and that in every class they will be asked to write, to ask and be asked challenging questions, and to collaborate with their peers to understand challenging content. Students are empowered with learning strategies that provide them with the tools to succeed as they strive to earn their high school diploma and start college at the same time."*

## Dr. Daniel King, College, Career, & Technology Academy

*When I arrived at Pharr-San Juan-Alamo, I quickly learned that the district's dropout situation was out of control, and that no one was doing anything about it. The district had lost almost 500 dropouts in the 2005-06 school year, and the problem was getting worse each year. The annual dropout rate for PSJA was almost double the state average and climbing. This was clearly unacceptable.*

*I began to think about the hundreds of young people in the community who had almost made it and were "stuck" without a high school diploma. With this occurring annually, the cumulative number would be quite large. The likely impact on these young people and their families hit me hard, but the probable cumulative impact on a community with hundreds of dropouts each year, resulting in thousands of young adults never completing high school, had devastating potential.*

*Knowing that these older young people would be hard to convince to return to high school I began to think deeply about the type of school that would work for older students needing to complete high school. Past experience as a high school principal told me that students that only need exit exams are very challenging to work with. They typically do not want to sit in class every day, and almost none are willing to come in for more than an hour or two a day. Attendance is typically erratic. Many just want to be given study materials and show up for the day of the test. Since they have all their credits and just need to take a test to graduate, they don't see the need to be sitting in class every day. The likelihood that students who failed to pass these tests while enrolled full time in high school will do well with a study packet at home is minimal, and even less likely if they have been away from school for several years. Adding to this problem, it takes several weeks for the district to get the exit test results from the state. As soon as these students take their exit exams, they typically stop coming at all. Once the results come in, if they failed to pass, it is more challenging than ever to get them to return. They have already disengaged for several weeks. Some have even moved or found a new job. It is critical to keep them engaged with school until they have earned their diploma. Every time they disengage the challenge of bringing them back increases.*

*I realized that a dual enrollment recovery program that engages students in college courses and allowing them to earn college credit while still in high school would solve these problems. Partnering with South Texas College, we could engage these students in working towards certifications and/or associate degrees in fields with good wages and high demand, a dual enrollment dropout recovery program. This would be better than recruiting these students to return to high schools where they had previously failed, especially since at that time, these high schools were plagued with performance and discipline issues. We knew our outreach campaign would be effective with these young people: "Never finished high school? Start college today!"*

In partnership with South Texas College, CCTA facilitates students' transition to the college and supports them as they begin their college career. A dedicated transition counselor, hired by the district with offices at both CCTA and the college, provides on-site support to students as they begin their college courses in earnest. She meets with them regularly, helps them navigate issues such as course selection and financial aid, organizes group events to maintain the CCTA camaraderie, and uses data to track the progress and outcomes of each cohort and inform the programming at CCTA.

In the fall of 2012, the college partnership will be strengthened even further. South Texas College is co-locating a teaching center (the first step to a branch campus) at the CCTA site. The campus will serve not only CCTA students but also regular community college students for a range of offerings. These will include criminal justice fields; college math, English and history; career/technical education fields such as welding; and a Police Academy – a three-way partnership among STC, the Pharr Police Department, and PSJA. This will enable CCTA students to take courses with college students more easily. Dr. King views this arrangement as the first step of a "reverse transplant" or conversion of the CCTA site into a true college campus.

Since its launch in 2007, CCTA has graduated almost a thousand students who were once likely relegated to unemployment or low-wage, low-skill employment. Moreover, at least half have graduated with college credits under their belts and the skills and the "college knowledge" so critical to postsecondary success. The school district has been transformed: Pharr-San Juan-Alamo graduated 1,885 students in 2010-11, up from only 966 four years earlier, just before Dr. King arrived.

### **Dr. Daniel King, College, Career, & Technology Academy**

*Once the school was launched, in meetings with high school principals, I began to use the success of CCTA to challenge the thinking of our high school principals and their teams. I developed the concept of CCTA serving as a laboratory through which the other high schools in the district would better learn how to serve needy students. Why were these students not succeeding at their home schools? "They don't care" was negated by the fact that they were persisting in school. "They can't or won't do the work" was countered by the success at CCTA. "They had to learn the hard way" didn't stand with the dismal experience of all the non-completers prior to this disruptive innovation.*

*The only explanation that held up under scrutiny was that the design of this school was meeting the needs of these students in ways that the home campus had not. I then challenged the comprehensive high school teams to identify these factors and design prevention and "back-on-track" initiatives in their school that would be a better fit for students who struggle. They identified a number of factors, including support, personal attention, personalized acceleration, and focusing these students on meaningful college work, leading to in-demand high wage careers.*

*If CCTA could provide all of these things, successfully graduate these hard to serve students (many with college hours), and successfully transition them to continue with their college studies after high school, why couldn't this be done with the majority of our high school students? This strategy has paid off, as the high schools have developed "back-on-track" solutions for their own struggling students.*

## Spread Throughout the Valley

Over the last several years, word of the success of CCTA and its approach has spread to other districts in the Valley and throughout Texas, and several have taken up Dr. King's innovation and launched dropout recovery schools and programs. Six communities are now participating in a replication network convened by Jobs for the Future. Brownsville, Donna, Edinburg, La Joya, La Villa, and San Benito – all districts with high low-income and Hispanic populations – have implemented CCTA-like dropout recovery schools and programs. Several have strong postsecondary bridging components with South Texas College including dual enrollment, and a few are just beginning to put the college bridge programming into place.

The goal of the network is to share successful strategies, provide informal mentorship for newer programs, and help all the districts push towards more effective postsecondary bridging and college success for their students. Since the model relies upon a partnership between the high school and a local college, the replication network includes not just other districts in the Valley but also two lead community colleges in the Valley: South Texas College and Texas State Technical College. This grouping has led to greater communication between the community colleges and the programs.

Replicators are incorporating core elements of the CCTA design while innovating on other aspects. For example, Donna ISD is using technology across all classrooms to help students develop skills needed to pass the state exit exams and succeed in college courses. Donna also provides students with college planners, and incorporates the use of AVID strategies such as Cornell Notes across all classrooms to ensure students have the organizational and study skills needed for postsecondary success. La Joya Independent School District co-locates its College and Career Center with the South Texas College (STC) campus, next to the high school; students mingle with college students every day and dual enrollment is even easier to arrange.

Edinburg Vision Academy maximizes the impact of the College Success Course and supports students in their first STC - based dual enrollment mini - mester by pairing the College Success course with the mini - mester. In this model, students begin the College Success course a week before their STC mini - mesters and start with the time management unit, which requires them to map out how they spend their time and to schedule their college class, homework, and study time before they begin their first real college class. Vision Academy teachers also teach note taking, using the textbook for the mini - mester course as the material from which the students take notes.

Even before they start their mini - mester, Vision Academy students are familiar with the course material and prepared to juggle the demands of a college course. During the course, the Vision Academy teacher attends the mini - mester course at STC with the students, sitting in the back and taking notes. Thus equipped, he uses the course content to teach students note-taking, and continues using mini - mester content as the practice material for the College Success Course, ensuring that her students experience success in their first on - campus college course.

Edinburg Vision Academy staff report that attendance and success rates for students in this paired model are extremely high -- illustrating the payoff of making postsecondary success manageable and within reach for students who formerly struggled with academics.

Across the replication sites, 925 students are participating in dropout recovery programming that transitions them to college success. School leaders are sharing strategies for effective intake, college-ready instruction, student supports, postsecondary and career counseling, and postsecondary bridging. These efforts are paying off: hundreds of students are participating in dual enrollment through these programs.

## **Increasing Effectiveness, Efficiencies, and Innovation**

Key lessons are emerging about the benefits of a regional replication network. School leaders often call each other to strategize about particular aspects of their programming – for example, to share strategies around improving attendance or supporting students in dual enrollment. They are also arranging more formal collaborations. For example, after the replication site leaders had the opportunity meet with each other and share strategies, they realized that they could approach their dual enrollment courses more efficiently by collaborating to enroll their students together in dual enrollment courses at South Texas College. While only a handful of students at an individual dropout recovery school may have students interested in a particular postsecondary course, across schools the number may add up to enough for a college class dedicated to dropout recovery students. Through this collaboration, individual sites save money on the courses, and students have more courses to choose from. At the same time, students begin to develop an expanded network of peers that can help them when they matriculate.

The dropout recovery schools have also begun to explore the possibility of creating an on-line referral mechanism so that they can refer students to each other. Given the high mobility of students in the Valley districts, this network could prove especially useful.

Individual schools and programs in replication network communities are also adopting aspects of the model. San Benito's Gateway Academy has initiated a partnership with nearby Texas State Technical College, having learned from other sites and from South Texas College about how to shape agreements for the College Success course. Their first step for this partnership is for TSTC to train Gateway Teachers to teach the College Success course.

Across all the sites, there is growing focus on college-ready instructional strategies rather than test-prep or solely on-line credit recovery. CCTA has hosted visits from replicators so that they could see the use of the strategies across content areas and the impact on student learning, and several are piloting the use of the strategies in their own sites. In San Benito, the shift occurred as the staff prepared to offer a College Success curriculum; they realized that their individualized model of instruction was not providing the students with the skills they would need in college.

Other schools are starting to consider ways to replicate the CCTA approach to supporting students as they transition to postsecondary. Several sites are instituting follow-up services by being more explicit with their students that they can return once they have matriculated for academic help. Keeping connections with the students enables the sites to provide them with ad hoc counseling around courses and financial aid as a form of postsecondary bridging while not having adequate funding to have an actual transition counselor.

Recognizing the potential of this model, in 2011 the Texas state legislature passed a bill (S.B. 975) that enables community colleges to launch CCTA-like programs on their campuses, in partnership with districts with a dropout rate higher than 15%. Community colleges that operate a dropout recovery program can receive from the partnering school district a negotiated amount out of the per-pupil for participating students. The legislation stipulates that students enrolled in the program receive a diploma from their school district, along with academic support and transition counseling that will ensure that they prepare for a successful transition to college and to a career. This college-based model is ideal for districts that are too small to mount their own CCTA-like campus.

## Spreading Lessons Nationally: Developing CCTA as a Demonstration Site

Recognizing the potential to spread the Back on Track Through College model not only Texas but nationally, Jobs for the Future is partnering with CCTA to develop the school as a demonstration site for college-ready instruction that succeeds with this population. In the fall of 2012, CCTA will host “residencies” for visiting educators, enabling visitors to participate in instructional rounds so that they can see the literacy-rich, engaging instructional strategies in use across all content areas. JFF will assist visiting schools, districts, national youth-serving networks, and community colleges to learn from this model and will assist them adapt the design so that their own formerly disengaged students are on a path to postsecondary success.

CCTA has already been utilizing instructional rounds to build its own teaching staff’s capacity to use the instructional strategies: teachers visit each others’ classrooms regularly to observe and provide feedback on each others’ instruction, using a carefully designed protocol that prompts reflection on practice. Teachers are now prepared to invite visitors into their classrooms to participate as rounds observers.

The residencies will also include opportunities to learn about the college partnership and how the model organizes and supports bridging into postsecondary and follow-up support to graduates in college. Lessons that CCTA and South Texas College staff will share include: developing partnership agreements that start at the top – between a superintendent and a college president; leveraging state policy to support the partnership; identifying clear expectations regarding roles and responsibilities of each partner; and allocating staff time both to accomplish the specific goals of the partnership and for regular check-in’s for smooth implementation.

### **Dr. Daniel King, College, Career, & Technology Academy**

*JFF and PSJA are partnering to develop PSJA’s CCTA into a high quality demonstration site to support the spread of this highly successful model across the United States. Visitors from all across the country will be able to learn about the operational and instructional aspects of the model in detail. While CCTA has had many visitors over the years, some leave inspired to start a similar program, but never get it going. Others focus only on the high school diploma. Feedback indicates that many of these districts need more support and/or follow up to get a program up and running. It has become obvious that there is a great need for this “back-on-track through college” approach throughout the country. To support replication and scaling, the development of CCTA into a very high quality demonstration site capable of supporting many visitors with quality assistance is critical.*

Audiences will be educators within Texas and beyond seeking to improve outcomes for this large and growing population. Given the imperative that all young people not only graduate from high school but also transition into postsecondary education, Dr. King and JFF are committed to sharing this model so that others can learn about the potential for these youth to change their trajectory and bridge directly into college, given the right supports and opportunities.

## References

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