



# Reinventing Rural Education: The Rural Schools Innovation Zone

INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICTS WORKING TOGETHER TO  
MAXIMIZE STUDENTS' COLLEGE AND CAREER PATHWAYS

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**Nearly 1 in 5 U.S. students attend rural schools.<sup>1</sup> That's about 9.3 million kids. Yet, during policy discussions, rural schools' unique challenges are often eclipsed by those of their urban and suburban counterparts. This report is a case study of an innovative, replicable public education experiment at three rural Texas high schools called the Rural Schools Innovation Zone<sup>2</sup> (RSIZ). This first-of-its-kind experiment is a collaboration between three rural school districts focusing on college attainment and career pathways for the 21st-century job market.**

It is proving so successful that the Texas state legislature passed a bill designating funding to incentivize more school districts to adopt the model.<sup>3</sup> The bill became law on June 2, 2023. Texas' significant step forward for equity and rural workforce development deserves national attention.

By raw numbers,<sup>4</sup> Texas is responsible for educating more rural students than any other state, given its vast metropolises, but it isn't even among the top 10 states with the largest percentage of rural students. The 2018-2019 Report of the Rural Schools and Community Trust found that rural public schools account for more than half of schools in 12 states.<sup>5</sup> In Vermont (55%) and Maine (54%), more than half of students live in non-metro areas. In 18 other states, rural students account for 30% to 49% of the student population. Those states are spread through every geographic region in the country. More American students attend rural schools than the largest 85 school districts combined.<sup>6</sup>

And, rural schools are becoming more diverse, gaining more English as a second language (ESL) and special education students in recent years, while seeing White rural students decrease by 3%. Today, nearly one-in-three rural students are non-White.<sup>7</sup>

While rural demographics are changing, rural poverty is stubborn. According to the most recent estimates from the 2019 American Community Survey, the non-metro poverty rate was 15.4% in 2019,<sup>8</sup> compared with 11.9% in metro areas. Poverty is more severe for rural children and minorities. Almost 23% of rural children under the age of 18 live in poverty, compared to just under 17.7% of non-rural children.<sup>9</sup> According to the U.S. Department of Agriculture, 30.7% of rural Black Americans, 29.6% of American Indian/Alaska natives, and 21.7% of rural Hispanic Americans live in poverty, compared to 12.7% of White rural citizens. The Rural School and Community Trust report found that nationwide, the communities surrounding schools in rural districts on average had a household income of just 2.68 times the poverty line.<sup>10</sup>

Those statistics point to the urgency of the need to improve school systems that serve rural students. Providing regionally relevant career and technical education (CTE) is especially important, as 42% of rural Americans say finding a job is a major concern, while only 39% of them are willing to move from home to find work.<sup>11</sup> Innovating to provide rural high school students with equitable access to college and/or career readiness opportunities for regionally available jobs is a national imperative that requires us to think in new ways and to try new things. Traditional, one-size-fits-all school districts must yield to more flexible programming.

This is why it is worthy to discuss the successful experiment just codified into state law in Texas. The goal of this case study is to explain and publicize the initiative, called the Rural Schools Innovation Zone (RSIZ), in the hopes that other states with significant rural populations may consider it as a tool for combating challenges,

including institutional stagnation, isolation, underfunding, and generational poverty, that prevent rural school students from graduating college or career ready.

The report is organized into the following sections:

- **Presenting** the Rural Schools Innovations Zone (RSIZ) as a 21st-century model for expanding career pathways and preparation, including early credit and industry certification components;
- **Quantifying** the challenges rural schools experience;
- **Understanding** the RSIZ career pathways and early college “academies”;
- **Designing and implementing** the RSIZ collaboration between three independent school districts:
  - Structuring the governance and leadership framework;
  - Aligning career pathways to the local economy;
  - Student recruitment;
  - Student outcomes
- **Operating** the RSIZ:
  - Finance and funding streams;
  - Human capital;
  - Scheduling and transportation;
  - Data sharing;
- **Codifying** the RSIZ collaborative and conclusion.

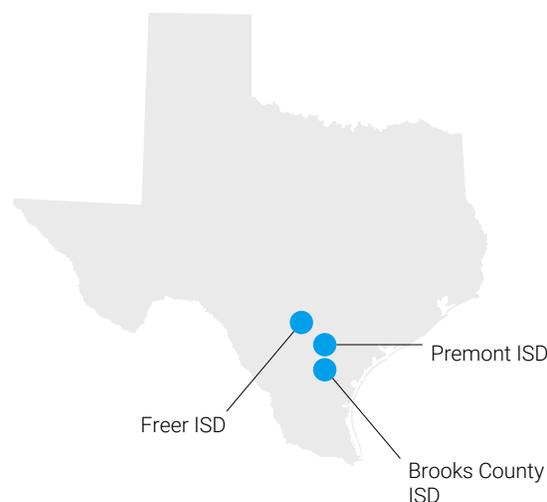
## BACKGROUND

Texas has doubled the number of rural preK-12 school students than the next closest state, North Carolina. In fact, 78% of its school districts (959 districts) have 3,000 or fewer students.<sup>12</sup> Despite their omnipresence, Texas' rural communities have lagged in college attainment and access to high-paying careers. But thanks to the Texas legislature's passage of a funding bill during the 2023 session, the state will begin to provide financial support for partnerships between rural school systems.

These partnerships will allow rural high schools – which often individually lack the economies of scale to offer students a wide array of college and career pathways – to share resources across district lines. The goal is to offer increased programmatic choices for students, so that more of them can graduate college and/or career ready.

Texas' lawmakers are encouraging replication of Texas' "Rural Schools Innovation Zone" (RSIZ).<sup>13</sup> The RSIZ is a multi-district rural collaborative in South Texas that is tackling the unique challenges experienced by rural high schools everywhere. The game-changing rural initiative is expanding opportunities for students, pooling resources, and sharing career pathways.

Specifically, the RSIZ is a regional partnership between three remote South Texas school districts spread across three counties, each with a single high school. Freer High School in Freer Independent School District (ISD), Premont Collegiate High School in Premont ISD, and Falfurrias High School in Brooks County ISD are collaborating with each other, as well as with local institutions of higher education (IHEs), and industry partners, and regional trade unions.



Through performance contracts negotiated with the three school districts, the RSIZ operates five CTE academies across the three campuses. The academies offer students multiple pathways to earn college credit and even associate degrees, as well as industry-based certifications (IBCs) and Level 1 and 2 certificates.

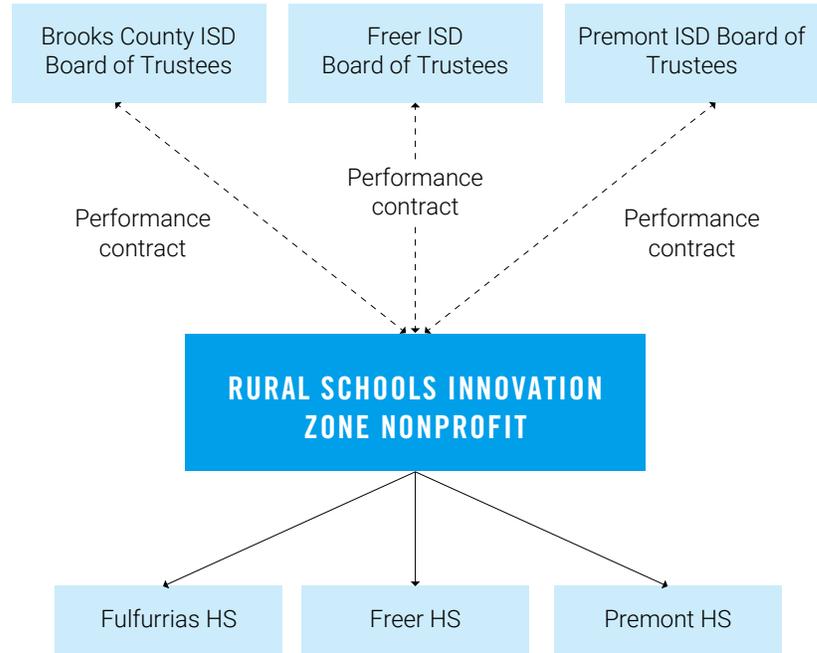
Any student in any of the three partner ISDs can attend any academy. The goal is ensuring students across the partner districts have equal opportunity to attain meaningful careers that pay family-sustaining wages. The collaboration is also designed to help isolated communities meet their local workforce needs, to discourage further depopulation of rural towns and counties.<sup>14</sup>

The RSIZ is an independent nonprofit, governed by its own board, separate from the elected school boards that regulate the schools in each of the three participating districts. While the three districts each must focus on ensuring that its own academic programs meet Texas Education Agency (TEA) standards, the RSIZ's top priority is ensuring students across all three districts – regardless of which district they are formally enrolled in – succeeds in its CTE academies and IHE partnerships.

Each elected school board contracts with the Zone nonprofit to manage the high schools' CTE academies, even as the **high schools remain district schools**.

The **contract is based on performance** on specific school-level goals. If the goals are not met and the Zone isn't doing a good job, the contract can be cancelled.

**School-level decisions** create Zone-wide opportunities for students.



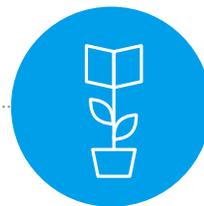
**IGNITE TECHNICAL INSTITUTE**  
Brooks County ISD



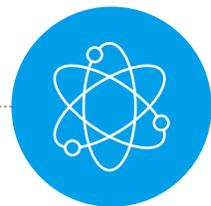
**CITIZEN'S BATTALION NAVAL JROTC**  
Brooks County ISD



**NEXT GENERATION MEDICAL ACADEMY**  
Freer ISD



**GROW YOUR OWN EDUCATOR ACADEMY**  
Premont ISD



**WILL ZELEYA STEM DISCOVERY ZONE**  
Premont ISD

The nonprofit, led by Executive Director Michael Gonzalez,<sup>15</sup> oversees the day-to-day operations, finances, staffing and curricula of the career and technical education academies operating on each of the participating campuses. The RSIZ also manages the partnership between the three districts, including: recruiting students to enroll in the academies, coordinating schedules across the three districts, facilitating student transportation between campuses, processing funding reimbursements between the schools, securing external IHE and industry partners, ensuring academy curricula meets industry certification requirements, identifying and securing internship and apprenticeship opportunities for students, and so on.

Students enrolled in the academies earn college credits and learn technical skills – oftentimes advanced – needed for certification in the career path they select. They travel between campuses in Wi-Fi-enabled vans, so homework and other school-related tasks can continue on the road.

## THE CHALLENGE

Declines in rural economies and populations mean inadequate funding for local schools. Lack of funding limits high-quality learning opportunities for rural students, including college and career and technical education (CTE) pathways. The RSIZ's collaboration is a 21st-century approach to scaling opportunities for students while sharing costs. It's a smart solution that reimagines the traditional education experience that is continuing to put rural students at a disadvantage.

In the mid-20th century, consolidating small rural school districts into a single regional school with an expansive attendance zone was a common approach for managing scarce resources.<sup>16</sup> Between 1940 and 2008, for example, the

number of public school districts in the U.S. declined from 117,108 to 13,924.<sup>17</sup>

Many states' Departments of Education use consolidation as a way to cut public education administrative costs.<sup>18</sup> It's also easier to monitor fewer schools. Often viewing small rural districts as inadequate, inefficient and unprofessional,<sup>19</sup> some states force or use aggressive incentive programs to push school district consolidation. For example, Arkansas requires all districts in the state to merge with a nearby district if they enroll fewer than 350 students for two consecutive years.<sup>20</sup>

Consolidating rural school districts may be practical, or even in some cases, unavoidable, but it's almost always painful. Not only do schools serve as rural communities' cultural hubs, they frequently host health clinics, day care centers, food banks, job fairs, adult education facilities, exercise centers, and so on. When someone prominent in the community dies, the funeral is often held in the high school auditorium – the only room large enough to accommodate multitudes of mourners.<sup>21</sup> Most importantly, schools are often the largest employer in town. When a rural high school closes, it can destabilize an entire community.<sup>22</sup>

The RSIZ's collaborative partnership model is revolutionary because it solves many rural high school problems without closing schools. It is an "anti-consolidation" approach serving as a model to strengthen rural communities, whilst allowing districts to maintain their unique identity and local pride.

In Texas, particularly, any discussion of consolidation invites revolt because high school sports are so important in rural communities. High school football pride does not just revolve

around the pigskin, it includes the marching band, cheerleaders, team mascots, homecoming royalty, and more. (Falfurrias ISD football fans are entertained by *two* bands, both the marching band and its state champion mariachi band.) The entire population of small towns can be found cheering at the football stadium on any given fall Friday night, regardless of sweltering heat or torrential rain.<sup>23</sup> High school basketball, baseball, and volleyball are also highly competitive.

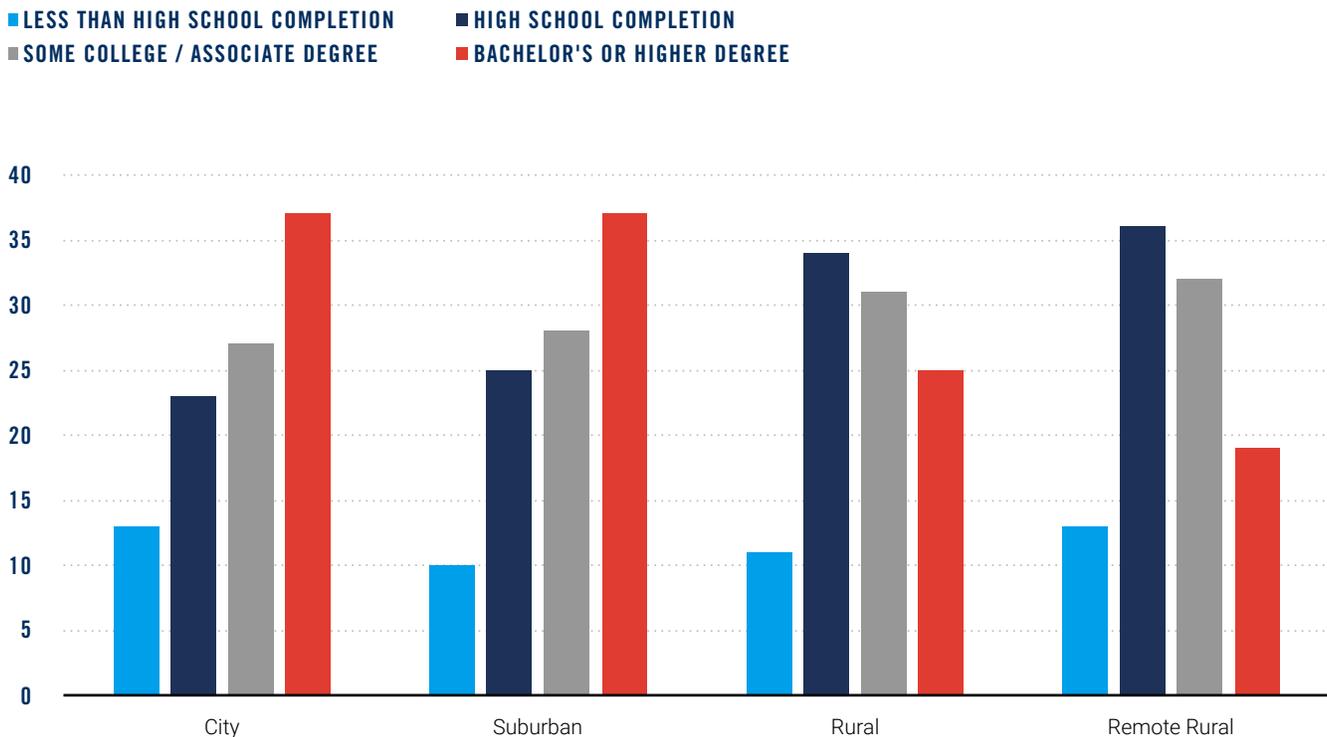
Because consolidation requires one town to give up its school, it is politically repugnant and, these days, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) only consolidates as an extreme last resort. As Freer ISD President Steve McQuagge explained,

**“There is a good reason the word ‘independent’ precedes the words ‘school district’ in Texas.”**

Given their central role in the community, rural high schools can offer students a richer high school experience than students might get in crowded, pressure-filled urban centers. But rural schools do shortchange students in many ways, although not necessarily through any fault of their own.

Rural students are 32% less likely to earn a four-year college degree than their city and suburban counterparts, and remote rural students – defined by the U.S. Census Bureau as students living at least 25 miles from an urban area<sup>24</sup> – are almost half as likely.

**FIGURE 1. PERCENTAGE OF ADULTS AGE 25 AND OVER, BY LOCALE AND HIGHEST LEVEL OF EDUCATIONAL ATTAINMENT: 2019**



Source: National Center for Education Statistics<sup>25</sup>

Low college graduation rates in rural communities mean a smaller pool of locals qualified to teach. Recruiting and retaining talented – or even qualified – teachers from afar is difficult in rural areas where low pay, isolation, scarcity of housing, and little by way of entertainment are facts of life. In Montana, which has the highest share of rural schools in the nation, principals reported hiring nearly 400 people without teaching credentials over the course of three years, according to a 2021 Hechinger Report.<sup>26</sup> With 65% of Montana’s rural schools reporting difficulty filling teacher vacancies,<sup>27</sup> that was necessary just to have sufficient faculty to lead classrooms.<sup>28</sup>

In rural Texas, the teacher shortage is so dire that small districts in various parts of the state, such as Devers, Athens, Jasper, and Chico, have recently switched to a four-day school week as an incentive to recruit and retain educators.<sup>29</sup> Administrators say that it’s the only way they can compete with nearby (relatively) urban or suburban districts that have implemented dramatic pay increases in the wake of the post-pandemic teacher shortage crisis.

It’s still too soon to know how the newly shortened school weeks will impact students in Texas. In Oklahoma, however, Emily Morton, a research scientist at the Northwest Evaluation Association who studies the impacts of a four-day week, said the schedule switch had a negative effect on test scores.<sup>30</sup> An extra day of free time also creates worries about students who depend on school for meals, working parents who lack child care, and unsupervised teenagers tempted to experiment with crime.

Because of their teacher recruitment disadvantage, rural high schools have historically offered a less rigorous, less diverse curriculum

than the learning opportunities available to urban and suburban students. This limits both college preparatory and dual credit coursework and career and technical education (CTE).

Advanced coursework opportunities provide high school students with the chance to earn college credit for free, or near-free, while they are still in high school. Common examples of advanced coursework opportunities include Advanced Placement (AP) courses, dual or concurrent enrollment in classes that count for both high school and college credit, International Baccalaureate (IB) courses, and early college high school models. (It should be noted that AP courses, and the tests that go with them, cost money.<sup>31</sup> As of 2022, 38 states subsidize advanced coursework costs in full or in part for low-income students;<sup>32</sup> a few subsidize all students who enroll.)

In 2022, 34.6% of high school graduates nationwide had taken at least one AP class during secondary school<sup>33</sup> – with 21.6% of the class of 2022 earning at least some college credit. But far more urban and suburban high school students had access to that opportunity than did rural students. Only 13.6% of urban students and 6.9% of suburban students attend a high school with zero AP courses, but 27.1% of rural students do.<sup>34</sup>

Rural students are not uninterested in college preparation or college credit. When at least three AP courses are offered, rural students are overrepresented,<sup>35</sup> with 37.6% enrolling in at least one AP course, compared to just 26.8% of urban students and 17.1% of suburban students taking advantage of the opportunity.

Texas students are overrepresented in dual enrollment statistics (the common term for high

school students taking college courses to earn high school and college credit simultaneously, in both academic and career subjects).<sup>36</sup> Despite Texas being the U.S. state with the largest percentage of its population (10.6%)<sup>37</sup> living in U.S. Census classified rural areas, 10.6% of Texas high school students are simultaneously enrolled in college, beating the national average of 9.8%.<sup>38</sup>

These are more than interesting statistics. They serve to illustrate that the desire and the need for college preparation and credit earning opportunities are as real in rural America as they are in our cities and suburbs. It is their lack of availability that creates an inequity for rural students.

That inequity likely contributes to the fact that only 25% of rural adults over the age of 25 have a bachelor's degree or higher (in remote rural areas the percentage falls to just 19%) compared to 37% of their urban or suburban counterparts (see *Figure 1, above*). But what do the statistics look like on the ground in rural South Texas? Freer ISD President Steve McQuagge explained,

**“College graduates in the community, I think there are five of us,” McQuagge said. “Maybe six, depending on what year somebody graduates or somebody passes away. I say that tongue in cheek but there are no college role models here.”**

Given low postsecondary degree attainment, expanding students' access to high-quality career and technical education (CTE) and career pathways in their own communities is even more imperative – but also difficult. CTE programs often come with high start-up costs, putting them out of reach of rural districts with limited resources.<sup>39</sup> Additionally (and obviously), rural communities also have fewer employers

than urban centers,<sup>40</sup> resulting in limited industry partners, fewer work-based learning opportunities, and a lack of information about careers in the region. That lack of information can lead to the preservation of legacy vocational programs instead of developing industry-relevant career pathways for today's local jobs.<sup>41</sup> Frequently, outdated programs are preserved simply because “they've always been offered.”

### AN INNOVATIVE SOLUTION

With its game-changing partnership model, the RSIZ is solving many of the challenges enumerated above.

For example, the RSIZ mirrors a successful CTE initiative Nebraska launched in 2012 which targets rural communities.<sup>42</sup> Nebraska's “reVISION” initiative is designed to ensure high school CTE is responsive to regional labor market needs. It requires participating districts to spend a year taking inventory of their current high school CTE pathways and studying regional labor market data. Once regional “H3 jobs” (high wage, high demand, and high skill) are identified, districts are incentivized to revise or restructure their CTE to include H3 pathways in their high schools.

During its planning year, the RSIZ engaged CareerCraft, a technical assistance provider that supports schools in planning and implementing college, career, and military readiness (CCMR) and work-based learning programs.<sup>43</sup> CareerCraft performed a labor market analysis and industry and occupation evaluation for the RSIZ, to determine South Texas' regional current and projected workforce needs. Additionally, students were surveyed about their career interests. In other words, the RSIZ carefully designed its career academies around jobs that students want, jobs that exist, and jobs that will pay well.

Finally, the challenge of rural schools' changing demographics and rural students' historically high poverty was noted in the preface. The RSIZ's students are a reflection of those national statistics and evidence of the urgent need for innovations to break generational cycles of poverty. The students we met displayed extraordinary grit and ambition, with a strong work ethic and focus on their futures. Some come from homes or small ranches where

the adults have only an elementary school education; some come from homes where there is no breadwinner; in some cases, RSIZ students are the family breadwinner.

The following is not just a case study of the RSIZ. It's the RSIZ's students' story too.

## THE ACADEMIES: CAREER PATHWAYS AND THE PARTNERSHIPS



*Celeste Garcia outside of the Ignite Technical Institute at Falfurrias High School.*

**Celeste Garcia cuddles a baby goat outside the welding lab at the Ignite Technical Institute academy at Falfurrias High School. Her long, glamorous fingernails are incongruous against the goat's fur, and against the industrial setting in the background.**

"I only got the nails last week for prom," she explained. "But I might keep them because they seem to be keeping me from burning the tips of my fingers off when I'm welding," she finishes with a laugh.

This high school junior is ambitious. She is already just one class away from earning her associate degree through the RSIZ academy's dual enrollment partnership with Del Mar College. She already has her welding and electrician certificates, which she relishes because she realizes that those aren't "typical" career paths for a girl.

Her career choice isn't the only measure of her toughness. Celeste's mom is too sick

to work, her father passed away when she was nine, her brother was killed in an oil tanker collision, she lost her grandmother on Christmas, and then an aunt to COVID-19. At 17, Celeste is her family's primary breadwinner, using some of the skills she learned at Ignite Academy. She plans to one day own her own contracting business servicing the oil industry. It would be foolish to bet against the determined, confident teenager.

**Over at the Next Generation Medical Academy at Freer High School, Anissa Sanchez is also tough, a quality that takes a minute to perceive in the shy, soft-spoken high school senior.**

After earning all four certificates Next Generation offers – EKG technician, phlebotomy technician, medical assistant, and patient care technician – she fielded acceptances from three universities to major in pre-med. She's spending the summer working in a pre-op surgical center and will begin college in the fall at Incarnate Word University, a Catholic college in San Antonio. The first-generation college student plans to be a surgeon.

Anissa explains she seized opportunities offered at Next Generation Academy after losing her beloved grandfather as a result of medical malpractice. She wants to provide good medical care, with the goal of preventing other families from experiencing a similar loss.



*Anissa Sanchez (front left) with fellow Next Generation Medical Academy students.*



Ryan Garza and his "Grand Champion" (October 2022).

**Ryan Garza's grandfather also looms large in his life. Growing up in the tight-knit community, he spends a lot of time with his family at his grandfather's small ranch, which has been in the family for generations.**

That's where Ryan houses his steer. He visits every morning at 6:30 a.m. to feed him and muck out his stall. The process repeats itself after football practice, with a full day of learning and a roundtrip bus ride from Premont High School to the Ignite Technical Institute at Falfurrias High sandwiched in between.

In October 2022, at the Jim Wells County Fair, Ryan's steer won Grand Champion in the American Steer category. He says he intends to win the "whole thing" next time.

Ryan, like Celeste, started in the welding program, but he didn't like it so he switched

to the electrician program. That's the beauty of a career pathways academy with instruction in a variety of skills. Students quickly discover whether they're suited to a particular job or not, without wasting a lot of time and with no expenditure of funds.

**That also happened to Dana Davila. The 10th grader planned to join the Air Force after graduation and then become a police officer.**

Then she enrolled in the RSIZ's "Grow Your Own" teacher academy at Premont High School. After "shadowing" elementary school teachers and interning in the academy's "Baby University" (which doubles as a low-cost preschool and childcare center for staff and neighborhood residents) she said, "I absolutely love teaching and now I actually want to do this as my career."

Her mom, Katrina Davila, has noticed big changes in her youngest daughter since Dana enrolled in the RSIZ academy and started interning with teachers. “It’s matured her a lot as far as responsibility-wise and she’s learned to manage her time with sports, school, her animal, her chores, her responsibilities,” Katrina said. “It’s a big change and she does love it.”

Dana’s animal is also a steer. She showed at the same county fair as Ryan last year, coming in third, which she thinks is pretty good for just her second outing. She mused that caring for her steer and the career preparation she’s getting at the RSIZ, while seemingly unrelated, are both giving her real-world experience.

“On the ranch you are dirty, cleaning poop, and it’s just messier, but then on the other side you have to be more formal, watch the language, make sure your vocabulary is up there,” she said of her teacher training. “But at the barn, you just talk as you do, take care of your animal and call it a day. They come together very well because they’re both teaching me a lot of life skills.”

There are **five academies** in the RSIZ offering high-quality pathways for students to earn postsecondary credit or industry-based certifications for high-need jobs in the South Texas region. All but the military academy has multiple IHE partners.



Dana Davila

## IGNITE TECHNICAL INSTITUTE AT FALFURRIAS HIGH SCHOOL (BROOKS COUNTY ISD)

📍 Del Mar College

📍 Texas A&M Kingsville

The Ignite Technical Institute sits in a massive building on the Falfurrias High School campus, just across a field from the traditional classrooms.<sup>44</sup> The building hums with the whine of table saws, along with sizzles and pops from welding torches. Students in protective eye equipment squint at electric circuit boards while working with insulated pliers. Ignite's partnership with Del Mar College<sup>45</sup> and Texas A&M<sup>46</sup> prepares students for industrial level work in five career pathways.

Students take classes at Del Mar in welding, welding engineering, machining, welding inspection, and so on. Dual credit is also available in English, U.S. History, Government, College Algebra, Speech, and Art Appreciation. Students have the opportunity to earn four different certificates and an associate degree. They shadow a welder or a machinist and complete an apprenticeship with a local business. Always in demand in the oil fields and on oil rigs, there are more than 6,000 regional job openings for welders, soldering technicians, cutters, machine setters, and related jobs. Students who go on to earn a four-year degree in welding engineering technology will have even higher paying opportunities.

In electrical systems, students take classes in the principles of construction, electrical



*Students earning industry certifications at Ignite Technical Institute.*

technology I & II, and more. They shadow an electrician or a fiber optics line installer and complete an apprenticeship, earning two certificates. There are well over 1,000 regional jobs open for electricians, security systems installers, electrical linemen, and so on.

In construction management, students can earn two certificates and they shadow a project manager, cost estimator, or a building or construction site manager. One project underway at Ignite is the construction of a "tiny house" from the ground up. Once the budding electricians get it wired for power, it will be used as housing to recruit a faculty member.

Ignite's final pathway is also an in-demand job in the region, with two certificates available in handling diesel/heavy machinery. Ignite also plans to soon add career pathways with certificates in H-VAC and entrepreneurship.

## NEXT GENERATION MEDICAL ACADEMY

- 📍 Del Mar College
- 📍 Texas A&M Kingsville
- 📍 Texas A&M International

In Freer High School’s old home economics kitchen, girls learned how to bake pies. Now, that classroom has been converted into a realistic “hospital floor,” where students learn medical procedures. The classroom is outfitted with a reception desk and hospital bays with EKG machines, oxygen tubes, IV drips, etc. There are rubber arms for practicing drawing blood and an all-too-realistic synthetic cadaver – more cutting edge even than the ones found in some four-year university pre-med programs.

Dummy “patients” lay silently in their hospital beds as high school students in scrubs bustle about learning skills that, along with 12 hours of dual college credit, lead to nine different certifications or certificates designed to give students an advantage for admission into an R.N. or L.V.N. degree program, with the dual goal of eventually easing the region’s nursing shortages. In 2023-2024, the Next Generation Medical Academy<sup>47</sup> is allowing students to stay for a “Bridge Year,” or a fifth year of high school, during which they can continue their education to earn the full L.V.N. certification and associate degree before continuing on to the next steps in their education and professional journeys.

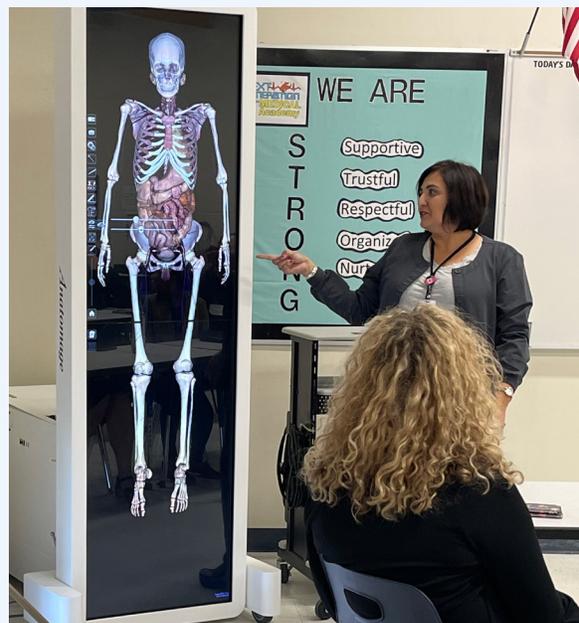
Next Generation’s founding director and former lead teacher, Mary Alice Cantu, established a policy that doesn’t let



*Student-built “Tiny House” under construction at Ignite Technical Institute.*

freshmen automatically wear scrubs. They have to “earn their keep” by completing a full year of the program and demonstrating their commitment to the academy. Cantu said students can’t wait to get them.

**“All I hear is, I want the scrubs. When can we get the scrubs?” she said. “When they’re in their scrubs, they get a pep in their step, they walk a little bit taller. It’s something they aspire to, especially the younger students.”**



*Perkins IV Grants helped purchase expensive teaching equipment at Next Generation Medical Academy.*

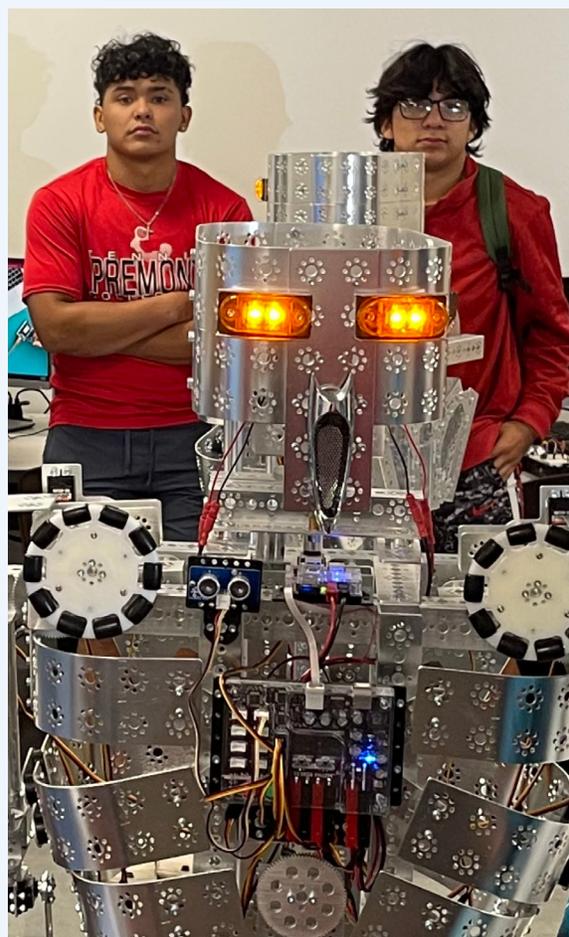
Cantu is proud of Next Generation students' 100% pass rate on state medical certification tests. The certificates represent an opportunity for students to earn money now by drawing blood or processing medical insurance coding at a doctor's office. Students have the opportunity to do a paid internship "rotation" at a local health clinic and earn college credits toward their nursing degrees. The academy positions them for nearly limitless career options in the medical field, including radiology technologist, magnetic resonance imaging technologist, medical assistant, and phlebotomy. One student used the pathway to prepare for a career as a dentist, while others who can put off working full time, like Anissa Sanchez, plan to go all the way to M.D.

### WILL ZELAYA STEM DISCOVERY ZONE

- 📍 Coastal Bend College
- 📍 Del Mar College
- 📍 Texas A&M Kingsville
- 📍 Texas A&M Corpus Christi

"Berry" and "Eve" rule the roost at the STEM Discovery Zone Academy at Premont High School.<sup>48</sup> They're the five-foot-tall robots students built as part of the robotics program. The STEM academy plans to add more robotics and drone courses because students are so enthusiastic about them. The academy currently offers two career pathways: biomedical science and engineering. For work-based learning, students participate in Future Health

Professionals of America<sup>49</sup> or enter the Skills USA competition.<sup>50</sup> As part of the Leaders in Future Technology Capstone Program, students design a technology-enabled solution to resolve a challenge in their local community. For dual credit, they take courses such as principles of biomedical science, biomedical design, and engineering science and design. They can earn 12 hours of college credit and a "medical laboratory technician" certificate.



*Students built Berry as part of the robotics program at the STEM Discovery Zone Academy.*

## GROW YOUR OWN ACADEMY

📍 Coastal Bend College

📍 Texas A&M Kingsville

It's called the "Premont Promise." Any RSIZ student who completes: (1) the Early Learning or the Teaching and Learning pathways at the Grow Your Academy;<sup>51</sup> (2) earns the program's "educational aide" certificate; and (3) completes a four-year degree will be given hiring priority if they apply to teach in Premont ISD. The program introduces learners to a wide variety of student groups and helps them learn their

unique needs. It familiarizes them with the processes for developing curriculum, coordinating educational content, and coaching groups and individuals. The academy offers 12 hours of dual college credit and gives students a chance at hands-on learning by shadowing Premont ISD teachers and working as teaching assistants at a district elementary school. Those interested in early childhood learning have the opportunity to intern at the "Baby University" preschool adjacent to Premont's campus.



*Credit: Melanie Stetson Freeman, Christian Science Monitor*  
*Student Andrea Cantu (right) working at the Baby University preschool, on her way to becoming a certified teacher.*

## CITIZEN'S BATTALION NAVAL JROTC

📍 Texas A&M Kingsville

The Citizen's Battalion Naval JROTC Academy is an example of the RSIZ being responsive to the community it serves.<sup>52</sup> With a strong military culture and large veteran population in the area, there had long been a desire for a local JROTC high school program. However, the federal government funds high school JROTCs, and schools must meet size and participation requirements before the relevant military branch will certify a JROTC program to open on a particular campus.<sup>53</sup> Individually, each RSIZ partner high school was just too small to meet the federal requirements.

The RSIZ's original plans did not include a JROTC Academy. But as a partnership

comprised of three districts, it meets the government's size requirements. So, the RSIZ honored the community's request and supported Brooks County ISD in applying for a JROTC at Falfurrias High School, on behalf of all three districts.

The JROTC program allows JROTC cadets to earn college scholarships that can contribute to the costs of an education at 260 different colleges nationwide. Qualified students don't even have to apply for the scholarship. The military automatically adds the scholarship funds to students' financial aid packages when they enroll at a participating college.

In 2023, the RSIZ's JROTC shooting team qualified for the state championship!



*RSIZ's Citizens' Battalion Naval JROTC on the march.*

## IMPLEMENTATION

### My Students, Your Students, OUR STUDENTS

In October 2022, a group of education administrators and policy experts gathered in the library at Falfurrias High School. They had traveled far to see the novel, rural in-district collaborative in person.

After being treated to a steak lunch – expertly grilled by lunchroom staff on an industrial drum converted into a barbecue by welding students – they leaned forward to listen to a panel of school board members and superintendents from the three RSIZ partnership ISDs. The leaders explained how the partnership came to be and how it worked. All were passionate about sharing the benefits that the RSIZ has brought to their districts and their community.

Freer ISD Board of Trustees President Steve McQuagge shared that he gets emotional when he thinks about how hard Freer students work in school and also after school to save money for college – forgoing trendy sneakers and other teenage temptations. He asked the audience, as they returned to the airport later that afternoon, to take a hard look at the “whole lotta nada” along the way, and think about high school students taking a similar ride – up to two hours roundtrip – on many school days for four years.

**“It’s hard, but the kids have to be tough because it’s a tough environment down here,” he said. “If it doesn’t sting you, bite you, or fight you, it’s not from South Texas.”**

He also admonished visiting school board members in the audience to find the courage to make sacrifices for their own students. “Nothing in your school environment is going to change unless you’re willing to change,” he flatly stated. “If you’re looking to improve something but you

want to say the same, then you’re going to get what you’ve always gotten.”

Then, he admitted that he initially voted “no” against the Freer ISD joining the RSIZ.

McQuagge explained that, as much as he and the other six Freer board members wanted to be able to access the Texas Education Agency (TEA) School Action Fund/School Redesign grant money that TEA had committed to seed the proposed partnership, three of the board members initially voted against it because of the structure of the RSIZ. They opposed the RSIZ’s autonomy. Because the RSIZ is governed by its own board of directors, Freer’s elected school board would have no authority over the RSIZ.

McQuagge is a convert now that he’s seen the RSIZ’s impact, but anyone who has attended a school board meeting – or reads their local newspaper – knows that school board meetings are frequently contentious. Board votes of 5-4 or 4-3 are often the rule, rather than the exception. And getting three school boards to pull in the same direction, when that direction includes giving up some control? That seems miraculous.



*Students Disembark from a Wi-Fi enabled bus after being shuttled to a RSIZ academy.*

In this case, the RSIZ was born out of a trusting friendship and, to some extent, dire circumstances.

In 2014, a noted and highly successful school superintendent came out of retirement to take the helm of Freer ISD. The state was threatening Freer with consolidation for its abysmal performance and the district was desperate to save itself. During the years Superintendent Steve VanMatre spent turning Freer around – straightening out enrollment, improving the teaching corps, and resolving facility issues – he developed a close working relationship with his lone high school principal, Conrad Cantu.

In 2017, VanMatre – either a saint or a glutton for punishment – moved into an even bleaker situation. He became superintendent of Premont ISD.

Premont ISD is the subject of a 2019 book by Ernest Singleton titled “Circling the Drain,”<sup>54</sup> because that’s essentially what Premont ISD was doing. The book chronicles the district’s journey to save itself, starting in July 2011, when the TEA revoked the district’s accreditation and issued an order of closure.” Premont would receive two such notices over a six-year period.

When VanMatre arrived at Premont, the district had been struggling to right itself for more than a half a decade, and had made progress, only to be derailed by the most recent superintendent’s arrest on marijuana charges.<sup>55</sup> There was no heat or hot water in the high school, attendance numbers were dismal, student discipline was out of control, and teachers were in some cases openly rebellious. But to really get an idea of how far things had deteriorated at Premont: there was no high school football team.<sup>56</sup>

Premont also had zero career pathways,<sup>57</sup> few opportunities for students to earn dual credit, and no CTE, other than an agriculture program that garnered little interest amongst the student body. VanMatre knew that Freer, the district he had just departed, had extra resources and funding because of its Next Generation Medical Academy. He called up his old friend Conrad Cantu – now Superintendent Cantu – and asked if he would be willing to share with Premont students. Cantu agreed. Freer and Premont would form an informal partnership where Premont would send students to Freer to participate in the academy and Premont would subsidize some of the academy staff expenses.

Inspired by the informal partnership and convinced that rural districts working together is the solution to improve college and career opportunities for rural students, VanMatre applied to TEA for a School Redesign Grant. TEA awarded \$1.5 million to create a managing entity to partner with Premont and Freer ISDs to implement an early college and CTE program.<sup>58</sup>

Shortly thereafter, Brooks County ISD, which is adjacent to Premont ISD, joined the partnership. The informal arrangement evolved into a formal partnership with the RSIZ’s incorporation.

Getting all three boards to agree to the new partnership wasn’t easy. It took persistence and a ton of communication to convince them to trust their neighbors, despite the obvious life-changing opportunities the collaboration presented for students.

Former Premont superintendent VanMatre, who pushed hard for the initiative, shared,

**“The benefits of this work are enormous. It’s still hard to do, even when everybody’s heart is in the right place. It’s not always easy and it didn’t happen overnight – adult egos and competition and disagreements come into play. But if your motivating factor is doing this for the kids, you follow what’s best for children.”**

What the neighboring rural school districts had going for them at the start of the partnership discussion – in the context of “creating change” – is that the school board members of all three school districts were very interested in expanding CTE course offerings to their small high school student populations. Done independently, however, it would have been far too costly for each district, because too few students would be enrolled in each class.<sup>59</sup> The decision makers knew they had limited options.

Advocates kept challenging the three boards to have the courage to make this big change for the students’ sake. Some members of Brooks County ISD’s board were also among those advocating for the CTE collaborative. Superintendent Dr. Maria Casas says that while she was focused on getting kids into college,

**“Board members kept saying, not everyone wants to go to college or a four-year university. They need jobs!”**

Ultimately, coming together around the mission of giving their rural students the same kind of college and career pathway opportunities as urban and suburban students enjoy pushed the collaborative across the finish line. In the rural collaborative agreement’s final iteration, the districts agreed to let the RSIZ operate autonomously on their school campuses.



*Credit: Anthony Ruiz, The Kingsville Record  
The RSIZ is born: Partner-district superintendents sign the resolution creating the rural collaborative in 2018.*

Casas is now a big supporter of the RSIZ, and she is proud that the Ignite Technical Institute on her campus serves the most students across the three districts. She welcomes Freer and Premont students as if they are her own.

**“One of the hardest parts of the work is the change in mindset – transitioning from traditional beliefs and a territorial mindset of my district, my students, to think in terms of collaborating and working together for all students.”**

Her words are a direct reference to the RSIZ motto:

**“My students, Your students, OUR STUDENTS” (emphasis original).**

They had a lot of help getting there.

### **Pre-incorporation**

The rural collaborative implementation work is complex. It takes significant coordination and added capacity, particularly when staffing in rural districts is so challenging and many individuals wear multiple hats. In order to ensure the work was both clearly structured and sustainable, TEA decided a neutral third party should support the design of the RSIZ. TEA had committed to underwriting the RSIZ for two years, so it wanted it to be structured for success.

Given its previous expertise in architecting and launching sustainable systems and structures, the TEA selected Empower Schools for this task. The national nonprofit has a deep portfolio of communities and school districts across the country that it has guided in this type of work and a robust team on the ground in Texas. Empower's technical assistance focuses on systems and structural support, performance management, strategic planning, leadership coaching, and facilitating budget, governance, and sustainability agreements.<sup>60</sup> Former Premont ISD Superintendent VanMatre says the three districts would not have been able to create the RSIZ without Empower's technical assistance.

During the initial planning and formation of the RSIZ, Empower in turn partnered with Ed-Point, a deeply experienced, local South Texas education consulting organization. Ed-Point contributed to the identification of the RSIZ's mission, vision, and baseline performance outcomes.

Together, the technical assistance providers played a coordinating role, with a steering committee convened to articulate the vision of the collaborative. The steering committee was comprised of the superintendents and high

school principals of the three partner districts, representatives of the partner IHEs, community leaders, and central office staff.

The steering committee's first task was stakeholder engagement. It began internally within the districts, to ensure the superintendents and elected school boards were all on the same page and agreed on the mission and vision for the collaborative. Constant communication between all of the parties was key. For example, Freer Superintendent Conrad Cantu said that he learned by trial and error that his board initially was more interested in understanding the parameters of the contracts and the financial implications for the district than they were in the opportunities the collaborative would provide for students.

### **Structuring the RSIZ Governance Model**

Before any contracts could be entered into between the partners or any memorandums of understanding (MOU) signed with any IHE partners, the RSIZ had to legally exist. The steering committee had to make a big decision: How should the rural collaborative be structured?

Some districts have found success collaborating through shared services agreements (SSA), but in the interest of creating a model centered on sustainability and shared capacity, collaborative leaders shied away from that model. With SSAs, one district owns or leads the work, while the others simply access the service it provides. If the rural collaborative was structured as a series of SSAs, there was fear that the work might not be equally distributed or that the district leading a particular program might have interests that were more aligned to its own goals, rather than with the collaborative as a whole.

The steering committee had a strong desire to see the RSIZ succeed equally for all three districts. It focused on helping the stakeholders build an entity that is student-centered, sustainable, and that had shared accountability built in. After considering several options, the stakeholders ultimately decided that the best fit for the RSIZ was to structure it as an independent nonprofit, with performance agreements to achieve specific student outcomes.

Creating the RSIZ as an independent nonprofit would grant it the capacity to support, advance and sustain the work of its academies over time. Importantly, it would also ensure the RSIZ was fortified against the political whims of school boards to ensure that the initiative would live beyond current district, community or higher education leaders' tenure. The strategy to create the nonprofit also conferred other benefits that an SSA simply could not match.

As an independent legal entity, the RSIZ can:

- Enter into contractual agreements with districts and partners that clarify roles and ensure the collaborative is meeting performance goals;
- Continually assess and improve programming;
- Disseminate lessons across stakeholders; and
- Qualify for grants and other funding, including philanthropic donations, that might not otherwise be accessible.

The RSIZ is governed by a seven-member board. Its founding members included a representative from each of the elected ISD school boards, the dean of one of the partner-IHEs, and several

prominent local educators, including a former Texas Commissioner of Education. It began holding public board meetings during the RSIZ's planning year so that the districts and their stakeholder communities could see when and what decisions were being made. The governing board's bylaws anticipated potential expansion of the RSIZ collaborative over time; any new district joining the collaborative would also appoint a representative to the board, ensuring shared representation and local voices in all of the board's decisions.

### Leadership

The nonprofit needed its own staff to ensure smooth internal operations and coordination between the districts. So, one of the board's first acts was to recruit its executive director, Michael Gonzalez. Gonzalez is a trusted leader in the region and had a track record of strong school leadership and student outcomes. Under Superintendent VanMatre, Gonzalez had led Premont Collegiate High School from an "F" to a "B" TEA rating, while simultaneously launching and scaling its early college partnership with Texas A&M Kingsville.



*Credit: Melanie Stetson Freeman, Christian Science Monitor*  
 RSIZ Executive Director Michael Gonzalez is an Ignite Technical Institute classroom.

Gonzalez developed the process for board communications, committee assignments and the annual schedule for board meetings. As the RSIZ's lone employee, Gonzalez outsourced the RSIZ's back-office systems like accounting, payroll, and so forth to reduce the burden of administrative paperwork. This, plus the addition of a part time administrative assistant and – in the spirit of the RSIZ – student apprentices helped reduce the RSIZ's overhead during the startup phase. Those strategies gave Gonzalez more bandwidth to focus on his primary responsibilities: negotiating and executing the performance contracts with the school districts, launching the academies and their course offerings, securing IHE and industry partners for work study opportunities, setting the RSIZ's schedule, identifying qualified faculty, and developing branded communications to ensure that all stakeholders are kept well informed and engaged with the RSIZ.

Today, the RSIZ board of directors continues to play a critical role in its success. It monitors progress and the effectiveness of the programs, and continues to prospect for expanded career and higher education opportunities for students.

### **Community Engagement**

Once the RSIZ governance model was settled, the steering committee invested in building an aligned communication and community engagement plan to begin informing and building support from stakeholders. The steering committee also wanted to build a structured communication plan to avoid misinformation that might give rise to community resistance. The goal was to build a constituency that believed in the value of the RSIZ and supported the new collaborative. It was also to ensure that families, students, and the larger community understood the opportunities that would be

realized from the novel arrangement, so that they could prepare to take advantage of them.

One way the RSIZ did this was to develop several core values that guided the way the RSIZ was discussed with external stakeholders. One was,

**“Students from rural communities should have every opportunity for access to challenging career paths to achieve high levels of postsecondary success.”**

Another was,

**“Rural schools are stronger through collaboration.”**

### **Creating the Academies**

In determining which pathways and academies the RSIZ would offer, it was first considered what the current CTE programs and course offerings were at each of the three high schools. For example, Next Generation Medical Academy existed at Freer High School prior to the RSIZ's start in 2019, but it only offered a Certified Nursing Assistant (CNA) pathway, had limited equipment, and did not partner with an IHE for dual credit. For several years, the program was nearly dormant because of a state regulation technicality. In Texas, CNAs are regulated by the Department of Aging rather than the Texas Board of Nursing. As Freer Board President McQuagge explained,

**“So we had as our teacher a real, certified, emergency room, save-your-life registered nurse, but she couldn't teach that class because she never worked in a nursing home,” he said.**

After CareerCraft, the technical service provider helping the RSIZ build out its CTE programs, did its analysis of the labor market, the RSIZ decided to discontinue the CNA program and

replace it with pathways to four certificates — EKG technician, phlebotomy technician, medical assistant, and patient care technician — for higher-demand and higher-paying jobs. The RSIZ structured the program so students work on one certificate at a time instead of simultaneously on all four. That way, if a student's family moves during high school, inadvertently depriving the student the ability to complete the four-year academy, the student would at least have some certification to take with them.

It was also discovered that two of the high schools already had welding programs. Rather than duplicate them or take the politically unpopular stance that one should be eliminated, the RSIZ decided that the welding program in the Ignite Technical Institute at Falfurrias High School would serve as the site for advanced coursework with dual credit opportunities, while the more typical welding program at Freer would be left undisturbed as an elective.

The RSIZ was intentional in the career paths it decided to offer to ensure work-based learning opportunities would be available and that jobs would exist regionally for graduates. For example, one of the RSIZ partner districts pushed the Zone to include veterinarian technician training in its course offerings. The RSIZ researched market data in a 200-mile radius around the three schools and found little data to support the creation of such a pathway. It also learned that a veterinarian technician didn't meet the RSIZ's targeted salary threshold. It declined the district's request to open one.

To keep the pipeline of industry certification, dual credit, and CCMR opportunities flowing, the RSIZ in 2019 used some of a Perkins Reserve Grant/Texas Regional Pathways Network Grant to form the RSIZ Impact Alliance. The Alliance brought

together regional stakeholders including schools, IHEs, regional employers, and workforce boards to establish systems, policies, and strategies to ensure RSIZ programming is high quality and sustainable. It was through the Alliance that cross-sector partnerships were formalized with a continuum of work-based learning opportunities. It also helped ensure programs were aligned with regional workforce needs and industry certificate requirements. These efforts will support positive real-world outcomes for students seeking employment in career fields that align with local high-wage labor market demands.

### **Recruiting Students to the Academies**

Once the RSIZ built out its programs of study and determined all of the possible pathways and opportunities it could offer, it turned to recruiting students. Student registration is critical to sustaining the RSIZ because the Texas' Foundation School Program (the state's primary education funding formula) funds schools based on the number of hours students spend attending academy courses.<sup>61</sup>

The RSIZ created and follows a "recruitment calendar" that includes presentations by RSIZ students, bringing students to visit the academies, family information nights, and so on. The RSIZ ensures that all teachers, staff, and counselors have a good grasp of each academy, and speak enthusiastically to their students about the opportunities and benefits that come from enrolling.

The RSIZ also knows that students who are enrolled in an academy and enjoying it are the best advertisement to their peers. Early on, the STEM Academy housed at Premont Collegiate High School had only one student enrolled from Freer High School. Once the RSIZ engaged that student to present to his schoolmates about the

opportunities available at the STEM Academy, 10 additional Freer students enrolled

Nor are the districts' middle schools neglected. The RSIZ takes high school academy students to the middle schools to share their experiences in the RSIZ, so that the younger students know about the opportunities that await them in high school. The RSIZ also organizes "field trips" to bring middle schoolers to the academies to build interest and enthusiasm. This is how, for example, the medical academy is able to enroll a new cohort of freshmen each year.

The RSIZ also uses summer programming to entice high school students to participate in an academy. Its summer programming focuses on work-based learning and paid internships, as well as opportunities to earn advanced certifications. Some examples: RSIZ students in the STEM program have completed paid internships at several engineering firms in Corpus Christi. RSIZ students in the medical academy are paid to work as interns at the Christus-Spohn Clinic in Freer, and the RSIZ students in the teaching academy have been paid to tutor elementary school students over the summer. Four Ignite students who learned woodworking in a paid summer internship used their skills to open their own custom furniture business.<sup>62</sup> To their surprise and excitement, they were flooded with so many orders, they had to start a waiting list.

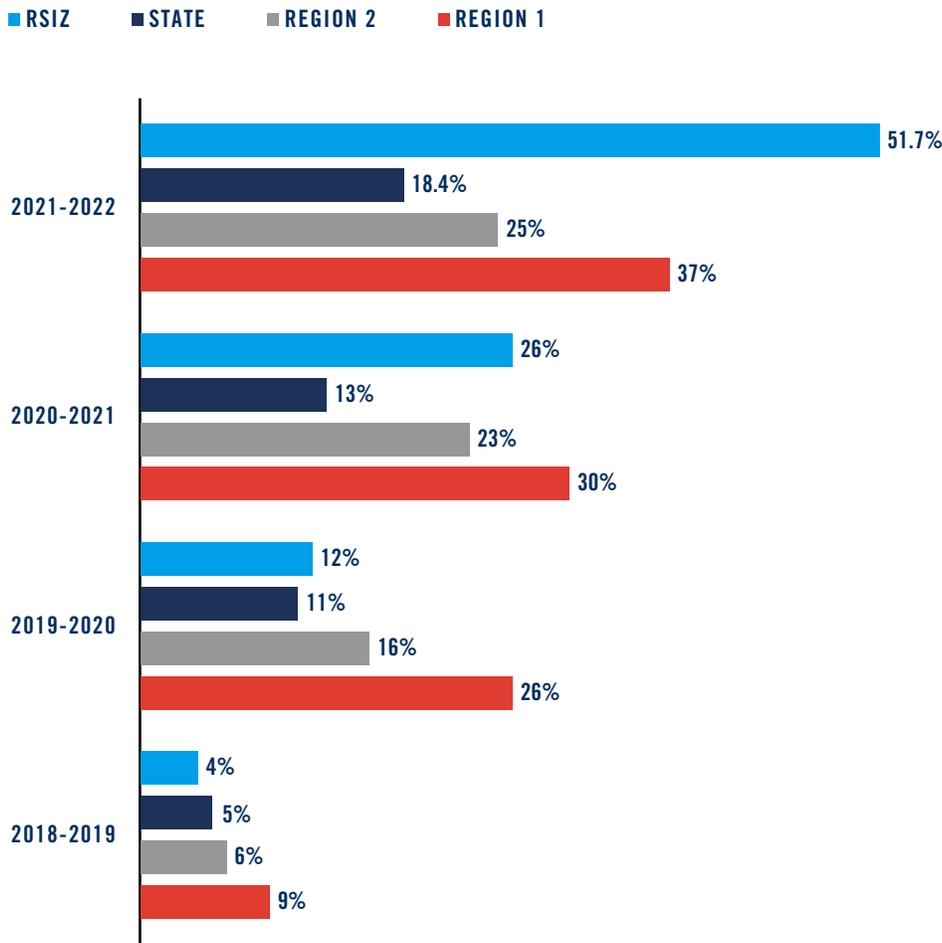
By the second year of the RSIZ, all five RSIZ academies had enrolled students from each of the three high schools. With student interest increasing each year, the RSIZ is constantly planning for potential expansion in terms of available certifications and the staff, equipment, consumables, and schedules to support them. For example, in 2018-2019, the Ignite Technical

Institute offered just three certifications, but by 2021-2022, Ignite offered nine industry certificates. In 2023-2024, two new high schools will join the collaborative, exponentially expanding dual credit and CTE opportunities for regional students.

### **Impact of the Academies**

The RSIZ recruitment strategies are paying off for both students and their districts. Each year since its inception, the RSIZ has doubled the number of students graduating with an industry certification, from 12% in 2018-2019 to 51.7% in 2021-2022. That is the equivalent of 37 certificates earned in 2018-2019 and 125 earned in 2021-2022.

**FIGURE 2: STUDENTS EARNING INDUSTRY CERTIFICATIONS ACROSS THE RSIZ, STATE, REGION 1 AND REGION 2**

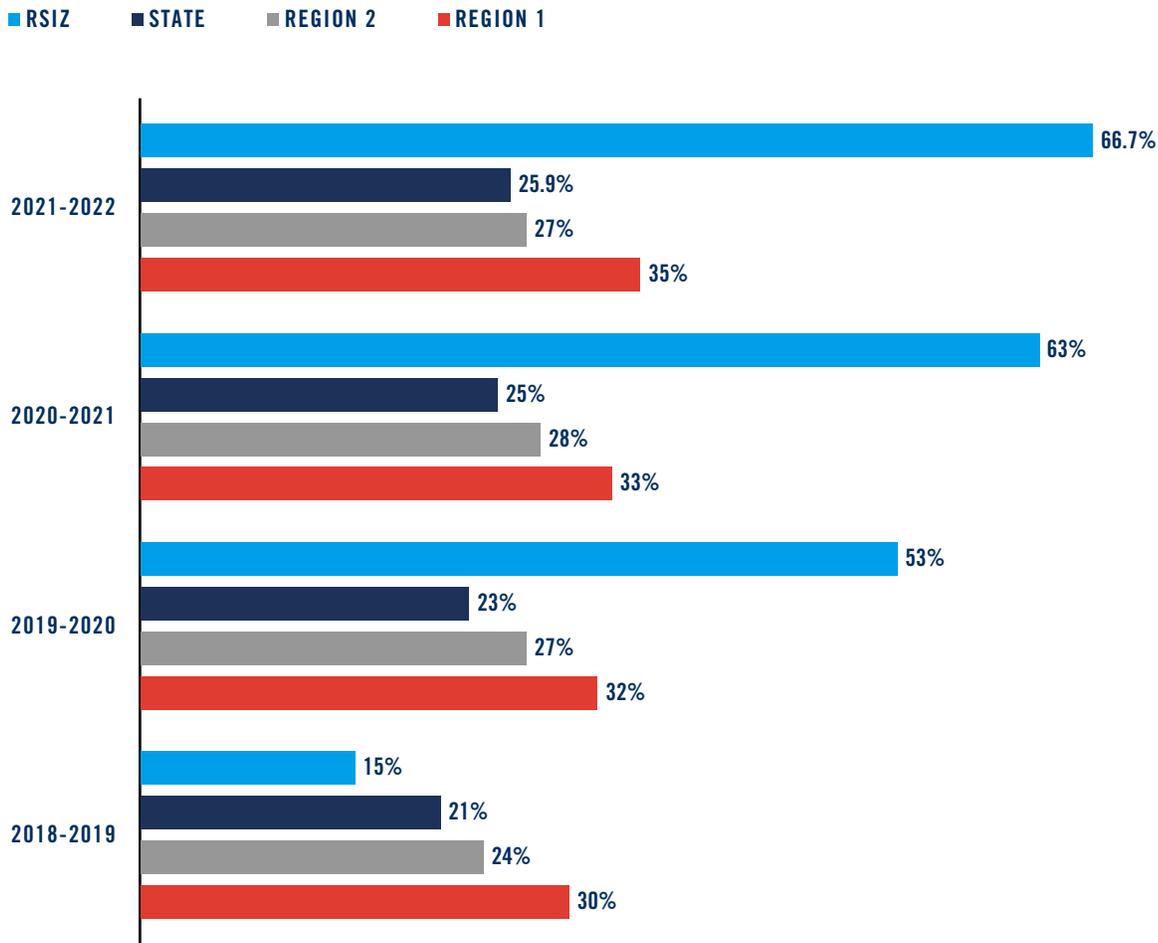


Courtesy: Empower Schools / TEA

The year before the RSIZ was created, only 15 students across the three participating districts earned dual credit. In 2021-2022, 66% of RSIZ

graduates completed dual credit, outpacing both the state and its geographical regions:

**FIGURE 3: STUDENT DUAL COLLEGE CREDIT COMPLETION ACROSS THE RSIZ, STATE, REGION 1 AND REGION 2**

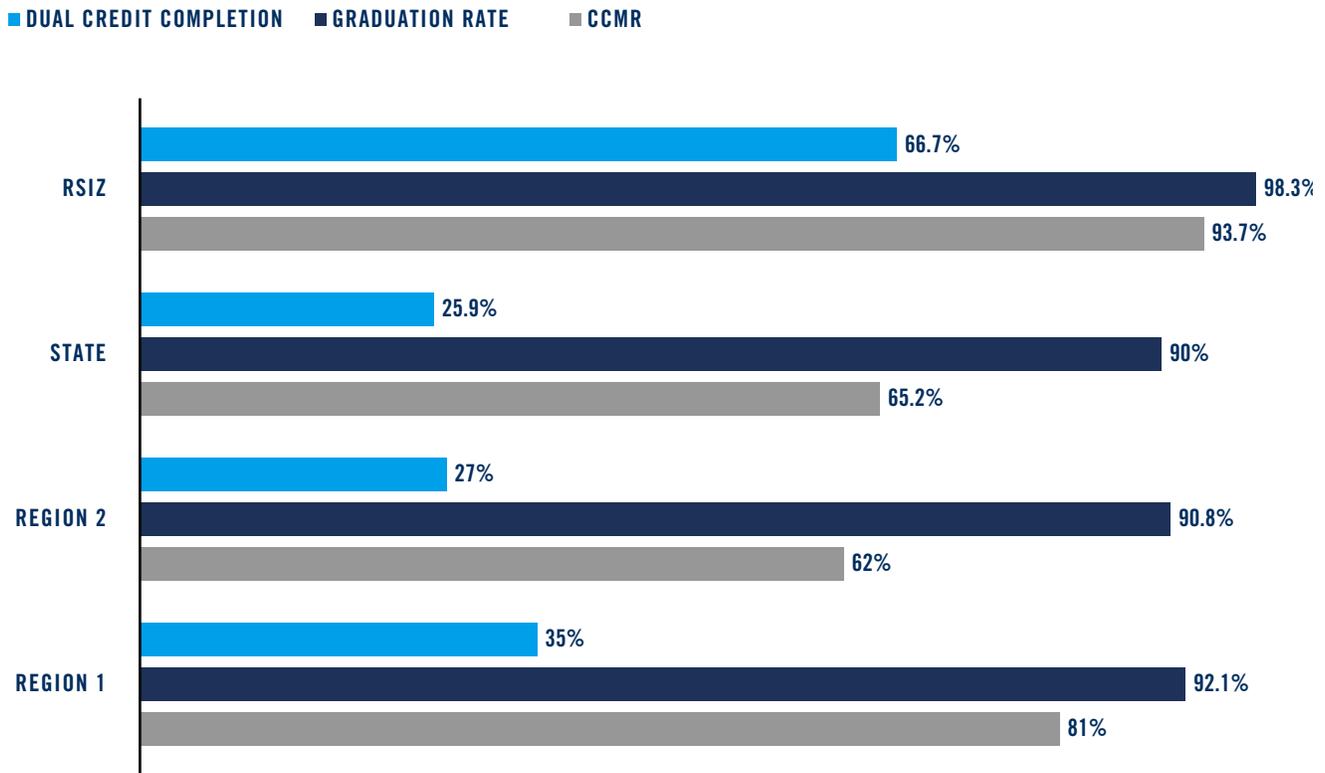


Courtesy: Empower Schools / TEA

In 2019, the Texas legislature passed funding for “College, Career, or Military Readiness” bonuses (CCMR) for school districts that graduate students college, career, or military ready. TEA uses a set of metrics: (1) a student meets the agency’s Texas Success Initiative (TSI) criteria; and either (2) earns a certification, earns an associate degree, enrolls in college, or enlists in

the military, that students must meet for their districts to qualify for the bonus. The CCMR outcomes bonus program includes boosted awards for low-income and special education students who meet the specified readiness criteria. Texas Academic Progress Report data shows that RSIZ graduates outperformed the state and their regions on all CCMR metrics.

FIGURE 4



Courtesy: Empower Schools / TEA

This is excellent news for the three partner districts, as the RSIZ is increasing their revenue with the surge in students garnering CCMR outcomes bonuses. The majority of that bonus money is being reinvested in program growth and quality. Texas Commissioner of Education Mike Morath said, that in his experience, very few rural high schools can effectively run more than one or two CTE pathways. Because of shared resources and collaboration, rural high school students in Premont, Freer, and Brooks County ISD have a multitude of choices and opportunities – and they are seizing them in ever greater numbers.

Finally, the RSIZ’s student success is not limited to CTE. It also encompasses academics. The Texas Success Initiative (TSI)<sup>63</sup> is a mandated test that high school students take to help IHEs determine whether they are ready for entry-level college coursework in English and Mathematics. In 2021-2022, the RSIZ, for the first time, passed the state in the percentage of students meeting TSI readiness. Even more importantly, the RSIZ has steadily worked to close the achievement gap for low-income students. A full 76% of the RSIZ’s economically disadvantaged students are TSI-ready, compared to the state average of 43% of economically disadvantaged students.



*Falfurrias High School Class of 2023.*

Clearly, the innovative collaborative is making a big impact on rural South Texas students. And their success is fueling even more opportunity for the students who will come after them, creating an upward spiral that almost seems too good to be true. But the data doesn't lie, which is perhaps one reason the Texas Legislature decided to codify and fund what started out as a handshake agreement between two school district administrators.

## OPERATING THE ACADEMIES

### Finance

Financial alignment is perhaps the most important element when districts decide to partner. If partners enter a relationship with different expectations and they don't achieve the desired outcome, relationships can quickly sour. Superintendent Cantu's board wasn't the only board with dozens of questions about the financial implication of joining the RSIZ. All of the boards wanted to make sure their financial interests were protected. Executive Director Gonzalez and Empower spent a good part of the planning year ensuring that financial arrangements were transparent and satisfactory to all partnership stakeholders.

Managing the RSIZ's startup costs – which can be significant when creating or expanding CTE pathways that require facilities, equipment, and consumables – was in this case, somewhat simplified. Each of the districts applied for and received ESSA monies that flowed to them through a TEA "School Action Fund Implementation Grant." Thanks to TEA's willingness to invest in the initiative, the RSIZ's necessary startup and capital expenses were covered for the first two years. This meant there was little tension over "who would pay for what."

The TEA money was spent on crucial pieces of the RSIZ's startup phase, including:

- Marketing and communications to inform prospective students and the community about the new CTE opportunities;
- Technical support (Empower Schools, Ed-Point, CareerCraft, etc.);
- Human Capital (high-quality teachers to build out the academy programs); and
- The Executive Director's salary.

The RSIZ also applies for Perkins Reserve Fund IV Grants each year, winning between \$500,000 and \$925,000 each year. Perkins IV grants, reauthorized by Congress in 2018, are the largest source of CTE funding and are distributed to both high schools and colleges. The U.S. Department of Education allocates funding to the states based on population, and the states distribute them to local education agencies seeking to grow their CTE programs. In the case of the RSIZ, Perkins Grants funded much of the equipment it needed for students to access a high-quality, skills-based technical education that also integrates academics.

The partner districts also sought and won competitive “Summer CTE grants” in the amount of \$50,000 apiece each year since 2020. They used that money to support the aforementioned RSIZ summer paid work-study opportunities. Giving students the opportunity to earn a paycheck over the summer provides students with enrichment, spending money, or college savings. It also creates more students eligible for CCMR bonuses in the future. Offering paid summer work opportunities is an important tool in the RSIZ’s student recruitment toolbox.

The CCMR bonuses are generally reinvested in growing the CTE academies and certificate opportunities, but as the programs continue to grow, they will begin to create revenue to cover other school district needs. For example, the RSIZ would like to hire additional college counselors, which could help generate more bonuses and create an accelerated cycle of student success.

In Texas, school districts can also generate CTE-weighted funding tied to students’ participation in CTE courses. The somewhat complicated funding formula is based on student “contact hours.” The more advanced and rigorous the coursework, the higher the reimbursement rate. Executive Director Gonzalez says this funding formula is a win-win. It incentivizes districts to provide more advanced course offerings, which offers students seeking marketable skills more chances to learn and better positions them for higher paying jobs.

Because the RSIZ has so dramatically increased student participation in CTE, by 2021 Premont ISD (which saw an overall enrollment bump) increased its CTE-weighted funding by 246%. The district of just 700 students now gets more than double the CTE funding than a neighboring

district twice its size. Freer increased its weighted CTE funding by 94% and Brooks County, despite an overall drop in high school enrollment, saw its CTE funding increase by more than 40%. In the case of Brooks County, the advanced trade courses and certifications at the Ignite Technical Academy made more of a difference than the number of student enrollments. Because Ignite’s courses are so challenging, the state reimburses them at the top rate, meaning, even if fewer students are enrolled, each is bringing more money into the district. By pulling that lever, the RSIZ was able to increase Brooks County’s CTE funding from \$640,000 in 2018-2019 to just under a million in 2021-2022.

TEA also reimburses transportation funding for students to take to CTE courses or work-based instruction that is not available at students’ enrolled campus. Before the RSIZ, two of the three districts received no CTE transportation funding at all. Now, they all do. In 2021-2022, the three districts combined received more than \$100,000 to offset the cost of students’ travel between the RSIZ academies, IHE campuses, and work-based learning.

### **Funding the Future**

All of the RSIZ’s stakeholders remained cognizant that TEA’s startup grants were a one-time gift. During the RSIZ’s first two years, the Executive Director, the RSIZ Board, district superintendents, school board members, district CFOs, technical assistance partners, and legal counsel worked to build a sustainable funding model that would be implemented beginning in year three, when the TEA startup grants ended. The goal: a funding model that would be transparent, accurate, reliable, and fair.

They settled on a tuition reimbursement system where each participating district pays tuition based on the number of “contact” hours their students spend in CTE or dual credit courses at a partner’s school. The RSIZ basically adopted the same funding formula for reimbursing each other that the TEA uses to send the weighted CTE funding to school districts, outlined above.

Each partner district pays the RSIZ a set rate of tuition per student contact hour for every student participating in each academy every semester. From those funds, the RSIZ deducts each district’s expenses in running the academy(s) on its own campus, to determine how much net funding is owed. For example, “District A” calculates the tuition it owes for each of its students participating in an academy, regardless of the academy or campus. District A submits an “expense report” to the RSIZ, which deducts those expenses from the tuition District A owed. District A then pays the RSIZ the net tuition owed. Because the tuition rates are set, all that a district needs to do to forecast how much tuition it will owe is to keep tabs on the number of students it has participating in a RSIZ program each semester.

The collaborative set all of the academies’ tuition rates lower than the weighted CTE funding the state sends each district. This means the RSIZ is virtually guaranteed to be sustainable (as long as the state doesn’t cut its CTE funding) and tuition reimbursement is predictable. The RSIZ can also adjust its tuition rates as needed based on program expenses.

The partner districts also agreed to split some of their CCMR bonus money with the RSIZ so it would have the resources to track student progress in CTE programs, intervene if needed to keep students on track, and to ultimately

produce more CCMR graduates each year to generate even more CCMR bonuses.

The RSIZ and the partner districts agreed that state CTE funding and the CCMR bonuses were an appropriate source of funds for the RSIZ, since the RSIZ is generating most of them. This incentivizes the RSIZ to continually grow and doesn’t require the districts to shift funding from other programs to fund the academies on their campuses. It also encourages equity because the state CTE funding is higher for low-income and special education students, incentivizing the RSIZ to ensure it is actively recruiting students from populations that have been historically marginalized.

In addition to the public funding streams, the RSIZ has pursued private grants and philanthropic donations and has received several grants that support workforce equity, summer apprenticeships, and so on.

### **Human Capital**

To beef up the recruitment of talented teachers – always difficult in rural districts – to help improve students’ academic and CCMR outcomes, the RSIZ supported each district in developing a transparent, merit-based teacher evaluation system. Then the districts applied (in 2019-2020) to be part of a recently adopted state program known as the Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA).<sup>64</sup> Once TEA approves a district’s locally designed system as sufficiently rigorous for inclusion in the TIA (it must include teacher evaluation and student growth), districts collect data to determine its top three tiers of teachers. Teachers in the top three tiers generate an additional allotment to be spent on teacher compensation that comes directly from the state. The higher tier a teacher achieves, the bigger the bonus. In the 2020-2021 school year,

the RSIZ brought the three partner districts together in a collaborative effort to expand their TIA systems to include all of the teachers within the three districts.

The RSIZ also helped fund 25 teachers across the three districts in working toward their National Board Certification – which automatically gets a teacher to the TIA “Recognized” tier, which earns the teacher, on average, an extra \$5,000 annually.

To staff its academies, the RSIZ has also gone the “alternative certification” route in some cases. For the Ignite Technical Institute, it brought master electrician Raul Chapa out of retirement to lead the academy and to provide students with deep subject matter expertise as they navigate project-based learning.

RSIZ Executive Director Gonzalez also strongly encouraged the three districts to align their raises and retention and performance bonuses as a way to avoid inter-district competition for talent.

Occasionally, to meet a need, the partner districts have expanded inter-district collaboration above and beyond CTE programs. For example, when one high school couldn't find a Spanish teacher, a partner high school allowed those students to travel to its campus for the class so that its students would have the opportunity to study Spanish.

The collaborative has also facilitated increased inter-district professional development opportunities. This is critical in rural districts where there is often just one teacher in a given content area – meaning that the teacher has no one to collaborate with or to turn to for professional support. One example, the RSIZ in 2019 convened a summit that brought all

teachers together to plan and connect. Feedback from teachers was that it is valuable to connect with teachers from outside their own district who teach similar subjects, and a positive experience overall.

A key takeaway: While the mission of the RSIZ is to provide excellent CTE and dual credit opportunities for rural students, good collaboration can't be confined. Because the districts are working well together in the CTE arena, it is only natural that they began turning to their partners to share other resources often scarce in rural education systems.

### **Schedule/ Transportation**

Arguably, the collaborative's greatest challenge each year – and a source of tension between the districts – is aligning the districts' schedules so students have the ability to move between campuses while still completing their core academic requirements. It must be remembered that TEA primarily evaluates district superintendents on how well their students perform academically. This can create a reluctance to align schedules for CTE when there are remedial students who need more classroom time to address reading and math. (Note: this is one consideration that high schools with large numbers of underperforming students should consider before embarking on partnerships).

In the case of the RSIZ, Superintendents VanMatre and Cantu aligned their schedules when they started their informal partnership centered around Freer's medical academy, but Brooks County ISD has resisted dramatic change to the master schedule.

The partner districts share their schedules each spring with the RSIZ's Executive Director, who works to come up with a master schedule for the following year that every partner can live

with. Gonzalez has to consider athletic practice schedules and other extracurricular events that compete for students' time and attention. He also holds planning sessions with partner IHEs, to ensure students will have the opportunity to take advantage of dual credit courses, whether at the IHE or at their home campus.

While the pandemic presented many challenges for every school district in the country, for the RSIZ, one opportunity that emerged was the viability of virtual and hybrid learning. While most skills-based CTE classes must be taught in person, others that can be done remotely or hybrid offer relief to the schedule – especially when distances are long, and travel is time-consuming.

### **Data Sharing**

Because the RSIZ uses student contact hours as the basis for its sustainable financial model – and because so many funding streams available from the state are based on student participation – accurate, integrated data collection and sharing between the partnership districts is critical. Data tracking and sharing is also key to understanding students' needs, identifying resources, and assessing the performance of the collaborative work. It requires a shared set of tools and systems that allow for effective sharing while keeping information secure pursuant to compliance regulations.

Midway through its planning year, to help it get a firm grasp on the enormous amount of data it would need to manage, the RSIZ brought on another technical assistance provider, School Data Squad (SDS). SDS serves as the RSIZ's data tracker and Public Education Information Management Service (PEIMS) coordinator. The RSIZ experienced a learning curve that likely

could have been avoided if the partners had agreed to data sharing and PEIMS systems earlier. Challenges included implementing the master schedule and coordinating transportation for students around it. Ultimately, the RSIZ and the partner districts signed a data sharing MOU that governs data sharing – including confidential student data – along with the performance contracts the RSIZ had already executed with the partner schools. That MOU governs elements of data sharing such as the purpose of sharing the data, the specifics of the data to be shared, the manner in which it will be transmitted, the parties responsible for managing the data, and so forth.

SDS also plays an important role in ensuring the RSIZ meets PEIMS compliance regulations. Not only is SDS tasked with clearly and promptly communicating the basics – like school calendars and transportation schedules – to students and families; it also created built-in opportunities for school counselors and the Executive Director to work together. Beyond just keeping accurate records for tuition payments and refunds, the goal is to ensure that students are educated on the available opportunities and to consider any adjustments needed to increase accessibility. In other words, to constantly evaluate and re-evaluate whether every student who wants to participate is given every opportunity to do so. In one case, the RSIZ learned early on that participation was down in one of the academies because one of the partner school's football coaches refused to budge on a conflict with football practice in the fall. The RSIZ adjusted its schedule (to the degree that it was possible) in an attempt to accommodate students..

The collaborative's school counselors play a role in decisions about course crosswalks (“scope and sequence”) for the pathways in each academy, they provide feedback, and their deep involvement with the data put them in position to recruit students to the academies and guide them on the course offerings that provide maximum benefits.

## CONCLUSION

Texans have long been concerned about the education of their children. The Texas Declaration of Independence in 1836 listed the failure of the Mexican government “to establish any public system of education, although possessed of almost boundless resources...” as one of the reasons Texas severed political ties with Mexico.<sup>65</sup> Texas students are lucky that the state is booming and there are not only resources to fund innovative collaborations, but that there is the political will to expend them.

In fairness, there is credible criticism of the legislature for failing to keep education funding on pace with current inflation,<sup>66</sup> and for accelerating Texas Republicans’ culture wars that ban books and demonize LGBTQ students.<sup>67</sup> But in the case of resources and support for rural collaboratives, Texas appears to be breaking new ground.

To build on the RSIZ’s success, Governor Greg Abbott on June 2, 2023, signed the bipartisan House Bill 2209 into law. Known as the R-PEP bill, it establishes a “Rural Pathways Excellence Partnership” to incentivize and support multi-district, cross-sector, rural college and career pathways that expand opportunities for underserved students.<sup>68</sup> The sponsor of the bill in the Texas House is J.M. Lozano, who represents the RSIZ’s region and is a graduate of Premont ISD. He states,

**“These schools are leading the way with phenomenal results and this bill creates opportunities for other rural innovation zones to be set up across the state and support rural students.” (March 28, 2023, House Testimony)**

The bill includes: (1) a funding formula that will increase funding for every student participating in a rural collaborative who participates in a college or career pathway; (2) a pool of grant funds for planning, implementation, and expansion to catalyze partnerships; and (3) a new type of “outcomes bonus” based on student outcomes five years after graduation. It also makes staff members working for the coordinating entity (the role of the RSIZ) eligible for membership in the Teacher Retirement System – a critical enabler to attracting and retaining talented leaders and educators to R-PEP collaboratives.

The message from Executive Director Mike Gonzalez after the passage of the R-PEP bill was,

**“The message is that the RSIZ is what strong collaboration truly looks like in a region, and the type of transformational impact collaboration can have on kids and the future of rural South Texas – actually, rural Texas period. I truly believe we can pick up this model and take it anywhere.”**

A proliferation of R-PEP schools would dramatically alter the employment and earning prospects for newly high-skilled young Texans. The Lone Star State ranks first in the nation in over-the-year jobs added, with 650,100 positions gained in 2022. That represents 5% growth in non-farm jobs, compared to 3% growth nationwide. Statewide, more than one million jobs are open in Texas.

Over time, the R-PEP schools could help rural communities not only keep up with the demand for skilled workers, and could revitalize entire regions as higher-paid workers start to create increased demand for local goods and services. These inter-districts partnerships can also change the way school districts envision and execute their role in student success. They encourage regional pathway planning, creating capacity for longer term longitudinal data tracking and reporting. They also serve as vehicles for aligning financial incentives across high school, college, and workforce sectors with bonuses for every graduate who achieves postsecondary credential of value within five years of graduation.

The state legislature was smart to recognize the genius of the RSIZ model. Other places with large rural populations should consider adopting it. For example, West Virginia is the state with the third highest percentage of rural residents at 51%. West Virginia also comes in third in states with the biggest worker shortage. More than 8% of West Virginia jobs are unfilled. Rounding out the top five states experiencing the worst labor crunches are Alaska, Georgia, Louisiana, and Virginia – all states with significant rural areas where career pathways to family-sustaining wages would no doubt be fervently welcomed.

Because the RSIZ sprang out of a trusted relationship between colleagues, it is unique in that its early advocates avoided some of the usual suspicion about hidden agendas, which frequently makes education innovation so politically difficult in public schools. Thus, while stakeholders interested in this model should encourage their state legislators to consider funding to support rural collaboratives – they should also start building relationships with geographically adjacent districts, regional IHEs,

and regional business and industry leaders. It wouldn't hurt to be ready when the time comes.

The RSIZ was the first of its kind, but now it is far from the only one of its kind. The model is catching on – there are currently three rural collaborative projects, with a total of 10 high schools amongst them, in at least the exploratory stage in Texas. Empower Schools also provided the technical assistance that launched the Southwest Colorado Education Collaborative, a five rural multi-district partnership in Colorado, and it's working with a rural region in east central Indiana. All of these rural collaboratives are increasing career and college opportunities for students across their regions, and providing workforce and college-ready graduates ready to enter the labor pool.

# Afterword

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