

## 2012 Urban Education Study Tour

### El Paso, Texas

Collaborative efforts in El Paso supported by education grantmakers have been designed to enrich educational opportunities, improve access, and to significantly improve outcomes for low income students and students of color. These efforts demonstrate how a long-term vision and commitment to a region’s students can serve a community. In this approach, philanthropic, education, and community leaders have focused on solving large-scale, regional education challenges to produce results. Efforts to improve education in El Paso span two decades, feature philanthropy playing a central role, include an all-hands-on-deck approach, and directly address issues of race and class.

The history of collaboration and investments in education in El Paso is rooted in a clear understanding of the region’s students and its needs. Leaders have used data to define the needs of regional students and families, build alignment and agreement about effective education strategies, and design programs that engage students and improve academic achievement. Cornerstones of successful collaborations have been aligned leadership and a culture of continuous improvement that takes responsibility for educating Latinos and low-income families. With a commitment to the local community, to students of color and to English language learners, education partners in the region have collaborated and built lasting partnerships to support education reforms.

#### **PLACE, CONTEXT AND HISTORY**

*Isolated in west Texas, El Paso is located on an international border with a population that is 80 percent Latino*

The El Paso region is comprised of two major cities—El Paso and Ciudad Juárez—divided by the US-Mexico border and home to more than two million people. More than 70 percent of the El Paso-Juárez population resides in Mexico. El Paso County, the fourth-poorest county in the United States, is home to nine school districts with a combined enrollment of nearly 135,000 students. As of 2012, 33 percent of children lived in poverty and 71 percent of families reported Spanish as the preferred home language.

The El Paso Independent School District (EPISD) is the largest district in

#### **Study Tour Learning Objectives**

- I. Explore methods for *building effective partnerships* among funders and between funders, school districts, and other local partners to improve outcomes for all learners
- II. Identify specific, high-leverage strategies to *support students of color and English language learners*, preK through graduation, and to position these students to be college and career ready and to achieve post-secondary success
- III. Understand the challenges of and approaches to *system alignment*, with particular focus on ensuring successful transitions between preK and K-12 and between K-12 and postsecondary institutions
- IV. Learn about successful investments in *human capital*, especially those that support teachers and education leaders
- V. Understand the range of *roles education grantmakers* can play as external change agents for urban school systems, the tensions that arise in these roles, and strategies grantmakers can employ to help resolve these tensions

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#### **The tour was guided by three of GFE’s priority themes**

- I. Closing achievement and opportunity gaps
- II. Strengthening the education pipeline
- III. Supporting more high quality teaching and leadership

the county with more than 64,000 students and an operating cost of under \$7,300 per student. The region is served by one community college network and one university, El Paso Community College (EPCC) and the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP).

El Paso's demographics represent a growing trend where nonwhite populations are becoming the majority in communities throughout the United States. Local leaders have long recognized the need to support the Latino population in the El Paso region with access to education coupled with programs that foster achievement. Their work is driven by the fact that disparities in access, opportunity, and achievement continue to persist. They believe that the new majority must be fully engaged to ensure academic success.

In this environment, educators are challenged to meet the needs of English and dual language learners, undocumented children, immigrants, and early learners. Their challenges are complicated by an international border that separates one of the safest cities in America from one of the most dangerous cities in the world. Hundreds of poor, severely underdeveloped *colonias* (Spanish for "communities" or "districts") located along the Texas-Mexico border are home to nearly 500,000 people, the vast majority of whom are Latino. In these *colonias*, 85 percent of children are American citizens, and many live in severely distressed environments characterized by dilapidated housing, a lack of potable water, vulnerability to disease, limited medical services, and a lack of basic supports to succeed in education and employment.

In order to give structure to education reform efforts, the University of Texas at El Paso has worked with education and community partners to establish and grow the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence. The Collaborative uses three goals in an effort to address achievement disparities among Latinos and other minority students: (1) ensure academic success for all students, K-16 (kindergarten to college); (2) ensure that all students graduate from high school prepared to enter and succeed in a four-year college or university; and (3) close achievement gaps among groups of students.

Initiatives stemming from the Collaborative have supported professional development for teachers and administrators, rigorous and aligned K-12 curricula, new and continued K-16 partnerships, and an emphasis on college readiness and completion. The Collaborative has consistently used data as a backbone to create effective changes within the education system, attracting philanthropic partners from Texas and across the country.

## ***LEARNING FROM EL PASO***

### **Data at the Center of System Alignment**

The collection and use of data has been a central feature of reform and alignment efforts in El Paso since the early 1990s. The focus on data, and the ability of education leaders to frame reform conversations using accurate data, was strengthened when El Paso Community College initiated its partnership with the Lumina Foundation's Achieving the Dream in 2004. At the time, 97 percent of all students entering El Paso Community College placed into developmental education for math. For reading the figure was 70 percent and for writing, 52 percent. These numbers, in addition to comprehensive regional statistics, helped leaders identify students, what classes they needed, and develop strategies linked to proactive interventions.

### El Paso Statistics

- El Paso is home to the second poorest zip code in the nation
- Some 55 percent of El Paso County residents have a high school diploma or less
- Nearly 90 percent of high school students remain in the region for higher education
- More than 116,000 students are enrolled each year at El Paso Independent School District, EPCC, and UTEP combined
- Seventy percent of students who attend UTEP never get counted in graduation rates
- More than 90 percent of UTEP graduates who apply to law schools are accepted (compared to 66 percent nationally)
- UTEP ranks second among all US universities in Mexican-American graduates admitted to US medical schools (UCLA ranks first)
- UTEP has 19 doctoral programs today, compared to one in 1991; research expenditures have grown from \$7.8 million to \$69.5 million during the same period

Education leaders have employed a number of strategies to share data, using it to identify and understand student needs and to design initiatives accordingly. Importantly, they have created an atmosphere that makes it safe to share data and ask questions. The Collaborative has engaged education, business, civic, and community leaders in the process of reviewing and understanding data, as well as ensuring data is accessible to local and state policymakers. EPCC, UTEP and school districts have data sharing agreements built on formal memorandums of understanding that ensure privacy and proper use, and the Collaborative has used its board meetings to share and analyze data, generate questions, address concerns, and seek solutions.

As data is collected and analyzed, education partners continually evaluate successes and unmet needs. In 2012, the Collaborative expected the next phase of its work to shift from being responsive to historical data to creating predictive analytics that *anticipated* student needs and regional challenges. In so doing, they sought to have an even more dramatic effect on student outcomes.

### Aligned, Focused Leadership

The University of Texas at El Paso has played a seminal role in creating an education system that supports students and produces results. Upon her appointment as president in 1988, Dr. Diana Natalicio found the university struggling with an identity crisis. In response, she emphasized the importance of “local control” for a college that needed to identify and use its strengths and take responsibility for helping Latino and low-income students complete college. Natalicio helped establish the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence in 1991 and has worked closely with regional leaders to develop productive partnerships and tangible solutions for students.

EPCC and its leadership have had a pivotal role in supporting student transitions from high school to college. Former EPCC president, Dr. Richard Rhodes, was a central figure in developing protocols and programs to better align the K-12, community college, and university network, building on the work of the Collaborative. In 2012, the Collaborative operated with a board structure comprised of the region’s top education leaders such as presidents from UTEP and EPCC, the mayor, regional superintendents, and business and civic leaders. These

partners met regularly and focused on the design and implementation of programs, data-focused reform efforts, securing resources to support reforms, and an ongoing evaluation of student and community needs.

The Collaborative also helped provide structure and stability to education reform efforts during leadership transitions, working to ensure that new leaders were in sync with the strategies adopted for the region, had a thorough understanding of student demographics and needs, and were dedicated to supporting existing

collaborative efforts. Long-standing leaders, such as Dr. Natalicio and Dr. Rhodes, cited a culture of commitment and partnership that embraces non-blaming tactics when solving problems, an approach that opens the doors to creative, genuine solutions.

### **Effective Partnerships and Programs**

Regional school districts, EPCC, and UTEP have deep relationships that embrace a “culture of access” for area students, many of which are linked to the work of the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence. Over the years, the Collaborative has secured millions of philanthropic and federal dollars to support education initiatives, as well as funding from state and national foundations and other government entities. They also spearheaded the El Paso Area College Readiness Consortium—an expanded network of education partners—to design programs that facilitate college access and degree attainment, accurately measure student progress and success, improve communication among stakeholders, and eliminate administrative barriers to awarding degrees to students who’ve earned the credit.

With an emphasis on supporting student transitions from high school to college, the Consortium set a target of offering every high school student in the region the option to earn college credit. They also designed a range of programs, many of which stem from El Paso Community College:

- The **College Readiness Initiative** moved college placement evaluation into the high schools in 2006 and began using the ACCUPLACER college-readiness assessment, an effort designed to help identify remediation needs before students move from high school to college. As a result, the rate of enrollment in developmental education at EPCC dropped by 24 percent for reading and 37 percent for writing.
- **Gateway to College**, offered by EPCC, engages 16-20-year-olds at risk of dropping out and supports them on the path to high school and college completion. Full financial support is available for qualified students.
- EPCC’s **Summer Bridge Program** engages high school graduates with developmental education needs in intensive summer courses to prepare students for college, with the majority then enrolling in EPCC.
- The **PREP Program** at EPCC supports students preparing for the college placement test with case management services that provide individualized assistance in navigating the preparation process. Half of all participating students increase their placement by at least one level.
- **Early College High Schools** in El Paso allow select students to acquire up to 60 college credits and an associate’s degree while still in high school and support students on the path to achieving a bachelor’s degree with only two additional years of college.
- Several El Paso school districts made the **Recommended High School Program**, a Texas 24-credit college prep program, the default set of college readiness courses. El Paso has more high school seniors completing the program than any other urban area in Texas.
- The EPCC **Dual Credit Program** allows high school students to replace high school classes with classes at the community college and earn high school and college credit. EPCC waived tuition for the program to eliminate financial barriers to participation. Enrollment increased from 93 students in 2001 to 3,517 for the 2011-2012 school year.
- **Think College Now** stimulates conversations about college entrance and preparation beginning in middle school. Initiatives are designed to reframe the long-term outlook of children and families to include college readiness, strategies for success, and securing scholarships and financial aid.

- The **reverse transfer partnership** between EPCC and UTEP—the first of its kind in the nation—allows students to simultaneously take classes at both institutions and ensures students who transfer to UTEP from the community college can receive an associate’s degree and that the community college can count it as a successful outcome.

“How do we share responsibility for educational opportunities available to young people in our community?”

—Diana Natalicio, president,  
University of Texas at El Paso

Over the years, initiatives have resulted in academic gains for students. Between 1993 and 2010, the number of 8th grade Latino students passing the state test for math increased from 31 percent to 80 percent. By 2009, 93 percent of El Paso high school graduates completed the 24-credit college prep program called the Recommended High School Program, the highest completion rate in the state. High school graduation rates also lead urban areas in Texas at 76 percent, and the Latino-White achievement gap is the lowest at 10 percent. Achievement gaps for high school students in math and science remain under 10 percent between White and Latino students, and approximately 60 percent of El Paso area high school students enter college immediately after high school.

Additionally, nonprofit partners in the community provide complementary services that support children and adults on the path to educational achievement and employment, further bolstering and linking the preK-16 education system for learners of all ages. AVANCE, a Texas-based organization that began serving the El Paso community in 1997, works to build parent-child relationships, serve child and adult English language learners, provide educational opportunities to parents, and support adult and family achievement with early childhood education. AVANCE’s Parent-Child Education Program was funded by the W.K. Kellogg Foundation in 2010 as a model for ending the cycle of poverty and limited education in communities nationwide. Project ARRIBA, a border-specific workforce development program supported by dozens of businesses and foundations, provides occupational skill training and case management services to El Paso County residents seeking living wage employment.

### **Commitment to Students of Color and English Language Learners**

The work in El Paso is grounded in the idea that students can succeed academically when the following are in place: supportive learning environments, leadership commitment, well-matched instructional staff, and targeted resources. Students with multiple barriers to achievement—particularly English language learners, students of color, immigrants, and those living in poverty—have a greater chance of achieving academic success when education systems are designed with student needs at the core. Leaders such as Drs. Natalicio and Rhodes have put student needs first and have helped produce results.

Through these efforts, education leaders have helped raise the expectations of the entire community, including students, families, teachers, administrators, community leaders, and businesses. Leaders recognize the urgency of engaging a growing Latino community, one that will account for nearly 100 percent of student growth in the next 20 years, yet often lacks opportunity, resources, and the cultural support to succeed. As a result of these efforts, Latino student enrollment EPCC and UTEP increased significantly in the past two decades. Both institutions now have student populations that are nearly 80 percent Latino—a percentage that reflects the Latino population for the El Paso region.

“What’s happened in El Paso is sustainable, it’s scalable, and we can change the country.”

—Richard Rhodes, president,  
Austin Community College

## **Grantmakers from Afar Make Strong Local Impact**

In a region with few local funders, El Paso has been supported by state and national philanthropic partners. These partners have supported collaborative and innovative approaches to education reform in the El Paso region throughout the preK-16 system, working to provide seed funding, accelerate progress on existing initiatives, engage the community around goals, help leaders and educators stay on course, provide expertise, and help sustain initiatives that the community can embrace and carry forward.

Many education-focused programs have been administered by the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence while engaging the university, the community college, and school districts. Over the years, the Collaborative has secured \$55 million from the National Science Foundation to fund and reinforce initiatives connected to math, science, and technology. Among other projects, the Collaborative initiated the K-16 Mathematics and Science Alignment Project in 2000 with Pew Charitable Trusts as a funding partner. Designed to address student readiness in math and science, the project engaged three school districts and continues to operate today. Importantly, the Collaborative provided a vision and an agenda that generated further investment in the region.

Additional philanthropic partners have also had an impact on education in the El Paso community. The Lumina Foundation's Achieving the Dream strengthened local efforts to drive change by utilizing data tailored to the local community and providing an articulated platform for effecting reforms and strategic programs. Educate Texas/Communities Foundation of Texas mentored EPCC during the process of developing early college high schools, offering knowledge and resources to implement the program. The Greater Texas Foundation has supported high school graduates and community college students with college scholarships, in addition to supporting new early college high schools. The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation selected EPCC to participate in the Developmental Education Initiative designed to intervene with supportive instruction for students during their first 30 hours of college credit.

In 2010, several foundations—including Educate Texas/Communities Foundation of Texas, Greater Texas Foundation, Houston Endowment, and The Meadows Foundation—supported research to construct Regional Action Plans for underserved regions in Texas. These action plans detail statistics and implications, areas of concern in the education pipeline, active foundations and initiatives, and explore models of partnership and investment for interested entities. Generally, national and state-based funders have engaged collaboratively with El Paso's leadership and other grantmakers, acting with a similar degree of care and compassion often found with local funders. Looking ahead, funders have ample opportunities to engage as thought partners, as "critical friends," and as advisors while seeking opportunities for change, strategic risks, and implementing innovative initiatives.

## ***THE LEARNING CONTINUES***

The dedication to partnership and to the vision of success for the region, supported by local leadership, state and national partners, has been instrumental in changing education outcomes in El Paso. Student achievement has increased, college readiness and enrollment has improved dramatically, and the preK through college system has focused on aligning goals and strategies to support students on the path to college completion. The formalized network of the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence has provided a platform for leaders to drive change and secure funding to support initiatives. Leaders have used data to more clearly define demographics, needs, and achievement gaps to describe and understand the complexity of the environment and inform strategies. And the work has been underscored by a commitment to the success of students of color and English language learners, with an understanding that the success of this new majority is essential to the health of the community, the region, and the nation.

## **2012 URBAN EDUCATION STUDY TOUR**

Grantmakers for Education's 2012 Urban Education Study Tour provided rich, place-based learning experiences for funders seeking to explore effective grantmaking strategies that support student achievement, constructive partnerships, and systemic improvements. Focusing on students of color, English language learners, the P-20 education system, and productive relationships between districts and education philanthropy, participants have had the opportunity to review and discuss data, research, lessons, and future plans to inform grantmaking strategies linked to promising educational models. More than 40 grantmakers participated in the tour's El Paso stop, engaging with dozens of local and regional representatives including superintendents, administrators, funders, politicians and students.

### **CITIES AND DATES**

El Paso, TX—April 2012

Newark, NJ—May 2012

Oakland, CA—November 2012

*While the study tour visits took place in 2012, this report was finalized in 2013 to include a current assessment of circumstances and conditions impacting education and grantmaking.*

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