

PSJA ISD to be featured on PBS

Dear PSJA Family and Friends: Check out this blog by John Merrow, education journalist and president of Learning Matters. This is a preview to a PBS special on PSJA to debut in about two weeks.

[I Have Seen The Future](#)

by [JOHN MERROW](#) on 13. JUN, 2012 in [2012 BLOGS](#)

“I have seen the future, and it works.” I write those words with some trepidation, because [another journalist used those exact words in 1919](#) and lived to regret it, big time.

If you remember your history, Lincoln Steffens said that after returning from newly Communist Russia. Only later did he see with clarity the harsh cruelty of the Soviet dictatorship.

I’m playing on a much smaller stage, of course, and I am talking about high school, not one of the largest countries in the world.

In two weeks or so, you will be able to see for yourselves what I am so enthusiastic about, because Learning Matters producer Cat McGrath is now editing our two-part report for PBS *NewsHour*.

But here’s the gist: in 2007, half of the high school students in the [Pharr-San Juan-Alamo school district](#) in southeast Texas, on the border with Mexico, dropped out without graduating, just as their parents had done. The district has 31,600 students — it’s 99% Hispanic and 89% economically disadvantaged. It was ‘dropout city,’ with a failure rate that was nearly twice the state average.

[Then Daniel King came to town](#), with Texas-size ambition and three bold plans. First, the new School Superintendent went after the 237 kids who had left school that spring without graduating, to try to persuade them to come back to school. He organized volunteers to go door-to-door to talk with them, with a simple — and counter-intuitive — message: “High school didn’t work, so come on back and let’s try college.”

In an abandoned WalMart store, he created a dropout recovery academy, but he didn’t call it that. It was instead the [“College, Career and Technology Academy,”](#) where students would complete their high school requirements, take some actual college courses and develop a connection to a local college or career training facility.

King is a persuasive man. Of the 237 students, he and his team convinced 223 to give education a second chance. That was in the fall of 2007. Very soon his College, Career and Technology Academy will graduate its one thousandth student.

“High school didn’t work, so let’s try college.” What a concept! We know in our gut that high school is a painful rite of passage for most young people, four years held together by friendships (if you’re lucky) but marked by boredom and, often, humiliation.

Why not attack boredom? Make the experience more challenging and interesting?

At the same time, he created a special school where everyone would go to college and high school at the same time. Admission to this small school would be by lottery. Students would spend half their time on the campus of a local college, half at their new school, which he named [T-STEM](#), with the last four letters standing for Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (the initial T is, of course, for Texas).

At graduation this spring, 55 of the 80 T-STEM seniors earned their two-year Associates degrees, which they received one week before getting their high school diplomas.

Who are these young people?

Meet 18-year-old Viviana Hernandez, whose parents work in the fields picking crops, as did she during the summers. Here’s part of what she told us.

Since I am a girl, I am required to get up earlier than everybody else. We usually get up at 5:30, get to the field at 6:00, and we don’t come back until like 5:00 or 5:30. Every day. There’s no Saturday, no Sundays. It’s every day, with no summer break at all. I stress out with my college work a lot, but I would rather sit in college classes and take a billion finals than work another day in the fields.

Viviana graduated from high school and community college this spring.

With the success of his dropout recovery school and T-STEM, King made the boldest move of all: import this approach into a huge, comprehensive high school, where being indifferent about education is the standard M.O., where it’s just not cool to be interested in learning.



Daniel King has been a revolution in south Texas education.

This idea, [‘early college.’](#) began appearing in the 1950’s, and, while firm numbers are just about impossible to come by, it’s widely believed that at least 10% of high school juniors and seniors are in some sort of ‘dual enrollment’ program. By and large, these programs attract gifted and/or highly motivated students. What King is doing is pushing the inside of the envelope, in a big way.

He had made this work in a Texas district one-tenth the size, so he was optimistic going in. He’s also a veteran (14 years as a Superintendent) who was named Texas Superintendent of the Year in 2006, the year before he came to Pharr-San Juan-Alamo.

Based on what I saw in PSJA school district, King’s approach has been successfully transplanted to a larger stage. Kids are kids, he might say, and they want to be challenged.

I hung out with some students who had just finished taking their final exam in Economics 101, taught by [Laura Leal](#), an instructor from a local college who travels to Memorial High School to teach her classes.

Leal told me that high school students were in some ways ideal. “It’s kind of like the experience that Adam and Eve had, before the apple. High school students see every challenge as possible; they have their whole future ahead of them.”

And, she added, they haven’t been jaded or corrupted by the anti-intellectualism of the college campus. That culture shock awaits. “Students in high school aren’t really experimenting with life yet. They don’t have the culture shock of being in a dorm because they’re still at home.”

She believes they will enter college more self-assured, not to mention that they will also be quite a few steps down the road to a degree.

The thread that ran through my conversation with the students was ‘respect.’ And students welcomed the higher expectations, even when it meant they missed hours of just hanging out.

“We use a college textbook, it’s a college teacher, it’s college work,” one said proudly.

“The (college) teacher treats us differently. High school teachers are always like ‘do your work , do your work, do your work,’ but this teacher isn’t that way. With her, It’s like ‘there’s the work, there’s the syllabus, and it’s your decision whether you do it or not.’”

“High school teachers kind of baby you,” another said, adding that, if you are failing a high school class, “you’ll get a bunch of extra credit just so you can pass,” but “if you slack off at college, that’s on you” because “you are not considered a kid anymore.”

At Memorial High School, 40% of the graduates have earned at least three college credit hours. And 60 graduating seniors from the district’s comprehensive high schools earned Associates Degrees from a local college.

The State of Texas encourages dual enrollment with financial incentives for colleges and participating high schools, because it wants and needs more graduates and a larger skilled labor force. King saw that opportunity, and his success should encourage others.

Could this be a new paradigm for the American high school? Remember, King is making this work in a district whose dropout rate was almost double the Texas average, with families with no tradition or expectation of higher education.

One final thought: I spent a fair amount of time with Danny King, and never once did I hear him use the word ‘rigorous.’ He’s about challenges, expectations and respect.

I have seen the future. Whether it spreads is not up to me, but I sure hope it catches on.

<http://takingnote.learningmatters.tv/?p=5797>