



Fighting Back Against Enrollment Decline

SAN ANTONIO ALLIANCE OF TEACHERS AND SUPPORT PERSONNEL

■ IN SAN ANTONIO, FAMILIES ARE MOVING TO THE SUBURBS. Kids are leaving the city's traditional public schools for public charters. Schools are closing, with more on the chopping block.

The San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel, concerned that shuttering schools would lead to neighborhood decline, refused to accept the dwindling student population as inevitable.

Alliance President Shelley Potter seized on the opportunity provided by the AFT Innovation Fund, urging the district to fight back. With the support of the Fund, the teachers' union is helping the San Antonio Independent School District compete by listening to parents and offering the inventive educational choices families are seeking.

San Antonio already had 11 public "internal" charters that were part of the district—but Potter believed more in-district charters could help reverse the tide of students fleeing the school system. Enrollment has dropped to 54,000 from a peak of 75,000 four decades ago. Two years ago, 4,600 students abandoned the district for charter schools; last year, another 200 children left San Antonio public schools.

"At some point when do you say: We're going to do something different so we don't continue to hemorrhage students?" Potter said.

Potter saw the Innovation Fund as a chance to shift the district conversation from closing campuses to getting local families excited about learning in San Antonio. The union did its homework to prove its point, surveying parents on the things they wanted most in schools: quality academics, small classes, safety, like-minded parents, and discipline.

The results were presented to the

school district, and the Board of Trustees subsequently passed a new discipline policy. Potter also took a long, hard look at where parents who pulled their children out of San Antonio schools were taking them, tracking which public schools were emptying out the fastest, and which charters were most popular. She made a crucial discovery: the public schools attracting the most students, even drawing children from outside the city, were in-district charters.

Parents gravitate toward "a public education concept with a more private school-like approach," said Board of Trustees President James Howard.

These homegrown public charters, with bilingual and other special programs, had developed a powerful word-of-mouth reputation among parents and had waiting lists to enroll.

To encourage more San Antonio schools to seek in-district charter status, the Alliance held a districtwide conference to explain the concept and provided stipends so that school teams could get together to write their proposals. As a result, the school board selected three new schools. It was clear the idea excited teachers and families from the start: charter status requires 80 percent approval from parents and staff.

These three schools—one elementary, one middle and one high school—feature distinctive curriculum plans, freed from district and state constraints by their charters. "That's what this is all about with charter schools: autonomy," said John Strelchun, grants development director for the school district. "Let the schools decide what's best for their children."

With public schools unaccustomed to selling themselves, the Alliance also hosted a marketing conference to offer schools more sophisticated tools to compete with external charters' advertising. Texas AFT President Linda Bridges describes the work on the three campuses, which are preparing

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*President, San Antonio Alliance of Teachers
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to open as charters in the fall of 2011, as “groundbreaking.”

- Travis Early College High School combines classes at San Antonio College—located just steps away from Travis—with its 9th through 12th-grade curriculum. The first class of Travis seniors has the opportunity to graduate in 2012 with both a high school diploma and a two-year Associate’s degree. Principal Dawn Parker envisions creating a full-service college readiness center at the school to help families across the community with applications and financial aid. She also hopes to keep tabs on the achievements of Travis graduates, as well as expand the campus visits her students already make from a stroll around the quad to meaningful stays that incorporate academic advising or cultural events.

- Rhodes Middle School, a technology magnet that offers high school-level courses such as advanced web design, sees the evolution to an in-district charter as catapulting it into the 21st Century.

“We’re at that critical point, if we didn’t move forward with this, I think we’d be falling behind,” said technology teacher Erin Schofield. Rhodes is preparing its 750 students, many of whom come from San Antonio’s impoverished Westside, for cutting-edge jobs, Schofield said.

Although Rhodes already integrates technology into some classes, the support of the Innovation Fund will help educators deepen the technology focus and think about ways to integrate it into core academic classes.

“Being a charter, that’s the buzz right now,” said William Davis, the head of Rhodes’ technology department and the building representative to the San Antonio Alliance. “We knew if we didn’t do this now, someone else was going to do it.”

- Highland Park Elementary is San Antonio’s most ambitious in-district charter. There, teachers have enthusiastically embraced a thematic curriculum, which integrates every subject around a single topic, such as water or Earth. The themes are all science-based, identified as Highland Park students’ weakest subject.

By learning themes across grade levels, “kids start making connections across the curriculum, rather than in pieces,” said 2nd grade teacher Gracie Oviedo, also an Executive Vice President with the Alliance. Highland Park’s new charter status allows the school to teach students state standards in any sequence teachers select, rather than a prescribed order. The charter formalizes a teaching strategy Highland Park educators had developed for years.

“Our parents are all fired up” about the new curriculum, said Principal Manuel Caballero. “This is a college-bound campus. We want the kids to be able to be critical thinkers and problem solvers, to be able to function in the real world.”

As the Innovation Fund grant moves into its second year, the Alliance is supporting the three schools as they make plans to strengthen their academic programs. The schools also will receive help to develop marketing plans and money to carry them out and get the word out to local parents.

Potter notes that Rhodes and Highland Park are still neighborhood schools—but they can now also draw students from outside their boundaries. Strengthening neighborhood schools, she says, is an important focus for the Alliance.

As a demonstration of its commitment to involving parents in their children’s educations, the Alliance has forged a new partnership with the National Council of La Raza, a Latino advocacy organization, to bring its parent-engagement training program, Padres Comprometidos (Committed Parents), to the city. The program is designed to educate parents in English and Spanish about child development and navigating the school system.

Beyond changes in the classroom and the community, the Innovation Fund has opened the lines of communication between union and district officials.

Through regular grant meetings, Deputy Superintendent Mary “Betty” Burks “grew to see that we were more about student learning than she ever imagined,” Potter said. “It really changed our relationship.”



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