

## Brownsville Independent School District

### District Profile

Rank among U.S. School Districts (by size):	94
Number of Schools:	52
Number of Students:	48,858
Number of Teachers:	3,272

**Superintendent:** Hector Gonzales was named superintendent of the Brownsville Independent School District in 2006. A native of the Rio Grande Valley, Gonzales has spent 28 years serving students across South Texas as a superintendent, administrator and teacher. For more than 12 years, he held top administrative positions in Brownsville, including interim superintendent from 2000-2001 and assistant superintendent of operations from 1998 to 2006.

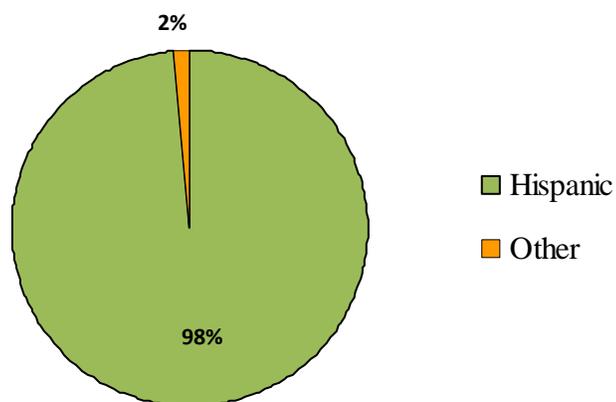
**Governance:** Seven-member board of education, elected at-large to serve staggered four-year terms.

**Teachers Unions:** Texas is a non-union state.

### Student Characteristics

Percent of Students Eligible for Free and Reduced-Price School Lunch:	94 percent
Percent of Students Designated as English Language Learners:	43 percent

### Student Demographics



(2007/08 data)

## **Student Achievement**

Brownsville Independent School District's (BISD) student achievement gains are evidenced by publicly available data collected and analyzed by MPR Associates, Inc., a leading education research consulting firm. Among the reasons that BISD stood out among large urban school districts:

### **Greater overall performance**

- In 2007, Brownsville outperformed other Texas districts serving students with similar income levels in reading and math at all grade levels: elementary, middle and high school, according to The Broad Prize methodology. In addition, Brownsville's Hispanic and low-income students outperformed their peers in similar districts in reading and math at all grade levels.

### **Greater subgroup performance**

- In 2007, Brownsville's Hispanic and low-income students achieved higher average proficiency rates than their statewide counterparts in math at all grade levels and in elementary school reading. In addition, Brownsville's low-income students also achieved higher average proficiency rates than their statewide counterparts in high school reading.

### **Greater overall improvement**

- Between 2004 and 2007, Brownsville showed greater improvement than other Texas districts serving students with similar income levels in math at all grade levels and in elementary and high school reading, according to The Broad Prize methodology.

### **Greater subgroup improvement**

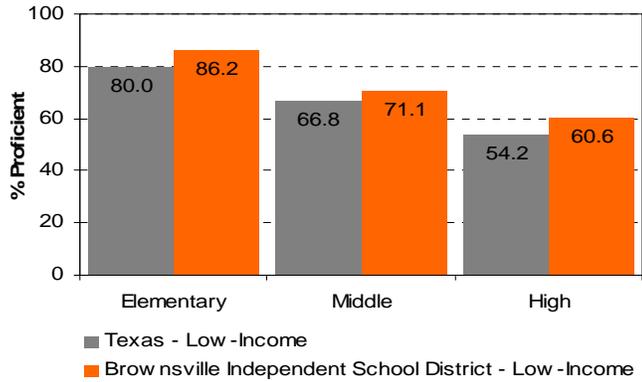
- Between 2004 and 2007, Brownsville's Hispanic students showed greater improvement than their peers in similar Texas districts in reading and math at all grade levels, according to The Broad Prize methodology. Low-income students also showed greater improvement than their peers in similar Texas districts in math at all grade levels and in elementary and high school reading.
- From 2004 to 2007, Brownsville surpassed the state of Texas average in increasing the percentage of Hispanic and low-income students who achieved math proficiency at all grade levels and elementary and high school reading proficiency.
- Between 2004 and 2007, both the average score and the participation rate for Hispanic students taking the SAT exam increased in Brownsville. The participation rate for Hispanic students taking Advanced Placement exams also increased over the same period.

### **Closing achievement gaps**

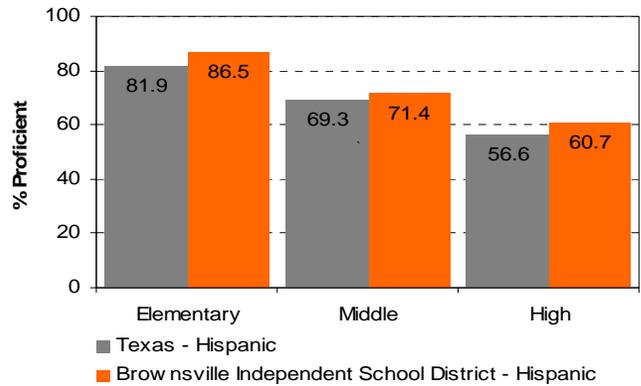
- Brownsville is narrowing achievement gaps between Hispanic students and the state average for white students in reading and math at all grade levels. For example, between 2004 and 2007, Brownsville reduced the gap between Hispanic students and the state average for white students by 12 percentage points in middle school math.
- Brownsville is also narrowing achievement gaps between low-income students and the state average for non-low-income students in reading and math at all grade levels. For example, from 2004 to 2007, Brownsville reduced the gap between low-income students and Texas' non-low-income student average by 9 percentage points in high school reading.

# Student Achievement Highlights

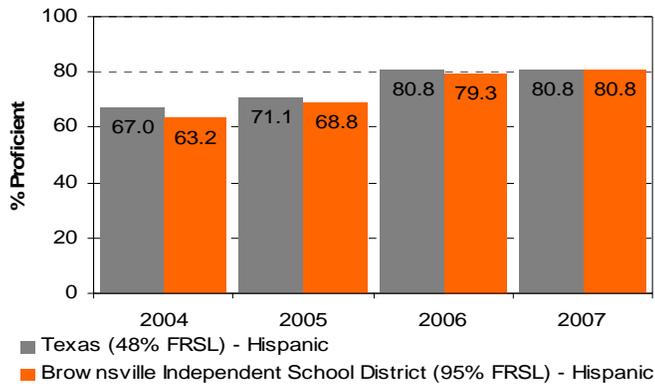
**2007 Mathematics Proficiency Rates for Low-Income Students in the District vs. Low-Income Students Statewide**



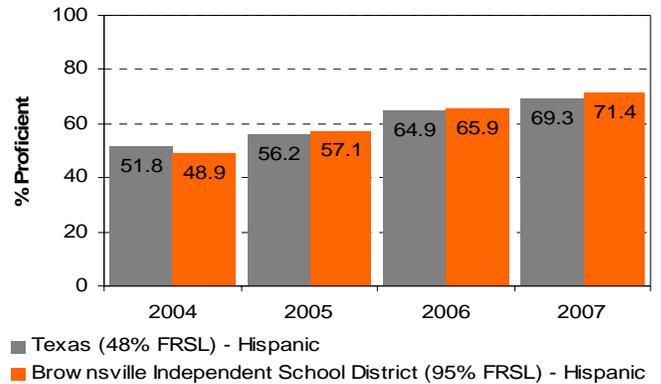
**2007 Mathematics Proficiency Rates for Hispanic Students in the District vs. Hispanic Students Statewide**



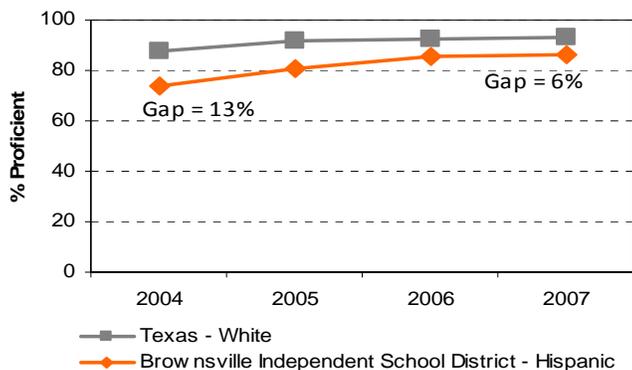
**High School Reading Proficiency Rates for Hispanic Students in the District vs. Hispanic Students Statewide**



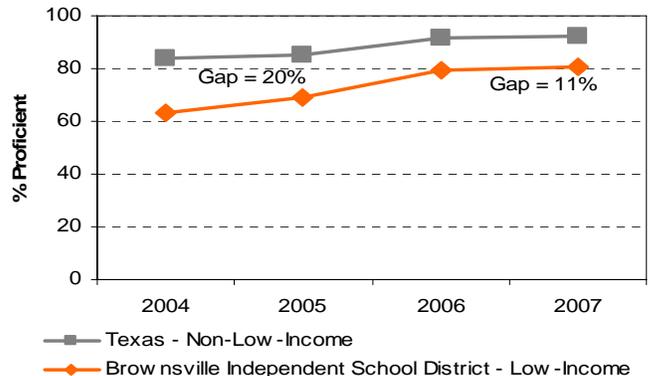
**Middle School Mathematics Proficiency Rates for Hispanic Students in the District vs. Hispanic Students Statewide**



**Elementary School Mathematics Proficiency Rates for Hispanic Students in the District vs. White Students Statewide**



**High School Reading Proficiency Rates for Low-Income Students in the District vs. Non-Low-Income Students Statewide**



## **Key District Policies and Practices**

SchoolWorks, an education consulting firm based in Massachusetts, collected and analyzed evidence of BISD policies and practices affecting teaching and learning. SchoolWorks' qualitative analysis, produced below, is based on a site visit, focus group interviews with district stakeholders, and analysis of extensive documentation and evidence. The criteria used for evaluation, available at [www.broadprize.org](http://www.broadprize.org), are grounded in research-based school and district practices that have been found to be effective in three key areas: **teaching and learning**, **district leadership**, and **operations and support systems**. BISD demonstrated the following effective policies and practices:

### **Teaching and Learning**

Research shows that effective teaching is the primary factor contributing to high levels of student achievement. BISD promotes strong teaching and learning through an aligned curriculum and assessment system that also gives schools the autonomy to determine how content and skills are taught. In addition, although ultimate responsibility for teaching and learning resides with the principal, the central office also has strong systems in place to support classroom learning.

### **Curriculum**

The state standards known as Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) constitute the heart of BISD's written curriculum, providing teachers with a framework of scope and sequence documents across subject areas and grade levels that outline what students must know and be able to do at the end of each six-week period. The district has further broken down each six-week period into calendars for teachers that suggest the pace at which content should be taught each day. The calendar also includes objectives, materials, lesson strategies and assessments.

Because the district believes in providing autonomy at the local level, school leaders and teachers determine how to individualize the curriculum for their particular campus. Calendars allow teachers to maintain a uniform curriculum delivery pace while still having some flexibility to pace within the six-week block to meet the needs of their students.

The district requires teachers at all grade levels and subject areas to use state-adopted textbooks. Teachers then have the autonomy to select supplemental materials that best meet students' needs, and in some cases, the district or clusters within the district will choose to adopt the same supplemental materials. District administrators report that district assistant superintendents who preside over different geographical areas collaborate with principals and teachers when selecting supplemental materials. These ongoing collaborations have been instrumental in communicating district-wide which materials have been effective so the same texts can be used at other schools.

Every year, representatives at every level of the district, including area superintendents, principals, department chairs, curriculum specialists and teachers, participate in a formal curriculum review. Because the district considers school-level input and ownership to be critical, Brownsville makes an effort to include representation from every campus in the review. In addition, the district invites teachers to sit on "teacher committees" that regularly review new curricular materials and recommend material adoption to schools and/or the district.

## **Instruction**

Many BISD students come to school with limited, if any, English skills, especially in the early elementary years. The district offers parents the choice of transition programs (i.e., where instruction occurs in Spanish with a strong ESL emphasis), and/or dual immersion programs (i.e., instruction in both Spanish and English).

Most BISD elementary-level teachers are certified in bilingual education. Using a range of research-based strategies and supplemental programs designed specifically for English language learners (ELL), teachers focus instruction for young ELL students on promoting rapid gains in English proficiency. This begins with training for all new BISD teachers based on four modules specific to ELL teachers, which include: identification and placement; content and instructional design; assessment; and compliance. In addition, the district deploys staff to each cluster to provide additional support for ELL teachers and principals based on need. Instruction for ELL students in BISD is individualized and based on the specific language skills that students require to excel; it is not one size fits all. As a result of BISD's focused efforts, district administrators report that by the end of the third grade, nearly every student is proficient in English and most exit ELL programs by the fourth grade.

BISD schools offer students who need additional instruction or practice in English a variety of interventions, including Saturday academies, optional extended-year programs, summer intervention programs, specialized computer software programs and after-school tutorials. The district staffs district-wide tutorial sessions and summer programs with teachers who have had the most success teaching specific lessons or standards.

## **Assessment**

The district's motto, "success is never an accident," refers in part to BISD's purposeful use of data to drive student achievement. While data is used at all levels of the district, teachers' use of assessment information to regularly drive individual student performance is particularly impressive.

District-wide benchmark assessments are central to BISD's assessment system. The district administers these assessments twice a year across core academic subjects in third through 12<sup>th</sup> grade, and district staff and teachers use them to measure student achievement of the TEKS. In addition to district-wide benchmarks, schools regularly administer additional assessments in core subjects to monitor student progress on an ongoing basis.

District administrators, principals and teachers district-wide have extensive knowledge of assessment data, analysis and use. Teachers receive extensive data analysis and interpretation training from the district, which continues throughout the school year during collaborative meetings. Meeting agendas at the school level reflect detailed discussions about data and subsequent instructional decisions based on assessment results.

Across grade levels and subject areas, BISD teachers use fluid student groupings to re-teach content that students have not yet learned and to move students toward mastery of specific learning objectives. "We look at the skills that are weak," said a BISD teacher, "The data tells us its objective three and four, and then those are the ones we're going to focus on." Teachers also use data to identify individual students who are close to proficient and provide additional coursework to move them to mastery. The focus is not just on moving struggling students up; the district also offers additional enrichment or pre-AP coursework to students who have achieved mastery in order to push them past proficiency to advanced levels of achievement.

In addition to benchmark assessments, teachers use informal, classroom-based assessments on an ongoing basis to gauge student learning and understanding of the content. Teachers describe daily observations, questions and homework as the primary methods of ensuring that instruction is individualized to meet student needs. The benchmarks serve as a summative measure of TEKS mastery.

### **Instructional Leadership**

The roles and responsibilities of school and district leaders are clearly defined to ensure that everyone collaborates to provide instructional leadership. The principal serves as the primary instructional leader at each campus and has the autonomy to delegate any portion of his or her role, except for instructional leadership.

BISD provides principals and teachers with frequent feedback on school and classroom practices. For example, across the district, school leaders are expected to attend the same professional development activities as teachers in order to be fully versed in instructional practices and to be consistent with one another in delivering feedback and support. All principals are also required to conduct regular classroom walkthroughs and provide teachers with feedback. All principals then submit the feedback forms to the area assistant (AA) superintendent. Principals also receive feedback via regular communications, meetings and walkthroughs by the AA. One BISD AA reports requiring 100 walkthroughs per semester.

While BISD staff recognize that principals are ultimately responsible for being instructional leaders, district and school personnel also believe a shared responsibility exists among staff at all levels to be instructional leaders. For example, assistant principals share in some instructional support tasks, including classroom walkthroughs. School-based facilitators and instructional deans, an additional layer of instructional leadership at the school level, support instruction as well by assisting teachers with data analysis and interpretations. Department chairs and district-level content area curriculum specialists also provide teachers an additional layer of content expertise at both the school and district levels. A teacher who has questions or who requires assistance in mathematics, for example, may seek assistance from a school-based department chair or a district level specialist.

The district regularly deploys content area curriculum specialists to regional clusters according to specific, weekly school schedules so they can support teachers and school leaders with instructional tasks. Curriculum specialists describe their role as “the link between the district and the campus,” noting that one of the primary things they seek to address is quality of instruction. Because the needs of different campuses vary, the daily tasks of curriculum specialists vary. “We collaborate with the principal, the facilitator or the dean of the campus,” said one BISD district curriculum specialist. “They’re the ones that are likely in the classrooms, and they’re the ones that direct us to where the need is on their campus.”

### **District Leadership**

For districts to be effective, the governing body of a district and its leadership must support the essential work of teaching and learning in schools. To communicate and realize a clear mission for student learning, research shows that district leadership must set clear strategic goals and hold the organization accountable for implementation.

In BISD, leaders return to the district’s mission to drive decision-making to ensure that district efforts and learning opportunities align with student needs. On an ongoing basis, the district and each of its campuses conduct continuous improvement planning processes that systematically review and revise the direction of the district, taking into account input from a range of stakeholders (i.e., district staff, board members, school leaders, teachers, parents and community). The district holds all staff accountable for results and has the necessary supports in place to drive strong performance results.

## **Mission, Vision and Values**

BISD stakeholders, including district staff, board members, school leaders, teachers, parents and the community, are committed to the district's mission "to produce well-educated graduates who can pursue higher educational opportunities and who will become responsible citizens in a changing global society by utilizing all resources to give equitable opportunities for students."

There are a wide range of programs available in BISD to prepare students to pursue diverse post-secondary opportunities. For example, the district has incorporated alternative centers to provide individualized support to students, dual enrollment programs with local colleges to enable students to earn college credit while still in high school, magnet programs and extracurricular activities into the delivery of education, providing a range of learning opportunities for students beyond core academics.

High staff retention rates also show commitment to the district's purpose. Many staff members have served the district for more than 30 years. "Most of the leadership is from the [Rio Grande] Valley. We see ourselves in our students. We are their role models," said one district administrator.

The district also considers parents partners in the district and central to achieving the mission. The district provides workshops and courses (e.g., English, nutrition) to parents to increase their education, which in turn helps parents to better support their children at home. Ensuring that parents are informed is an additional commitment in BISD. Parent Centers exist in all district schools, as well as a weekly newspaper and a local television station that is broadcast in both English and Spanish. The superintendent's "community coffees" offer parents an opportunity to directly interact with district leadership and learn about what is happening in the district, including upcoming changes and expectations for students.

## **Strategic Planning**

In its district improvement plan, BISD sets annual goals for student achievement and district performance. When school leaders prepare their individual campus improvement plans, they then tightly align them with the district improvement plan, which, in turn, is directly aligned with Texas state goals prescribed by the Texas Education Code. As a result, academic performance targets for all schools are the same as those of the district: "90 percent of students achieving mastery across content areas," meaning the entire district is well-situated to progress towards a common goal. Stakeholders across the district are also clear about BISD's primary goals and are able to participate in meeting these goals through a range of formal committees and communications.

The District Educational Improvement Committee (DEIC), a district advisory group of campus, district, community and parent representatives meets monthly to develop annual district goals and objectives. The DEIC subcommittees review and analyze data and recommend goals to the district based on DEIC priorities. As a liaison to the community, the DEIC is responsible for communicating information to constituents and gathering feedback on the developing district improvement plan. The school board ultimately reviews and approves the district improvement plan.

Each campus has its own school-based decision-making team consisting of teachers, parents, community members and other staff who provide input on district and campus plans. BISD also utilizes input from school-based decision-making teams for virtually all local campus decisions, including budget, purchasing, curriculum, data analysis and hiring.

Through regular meetings with school, district and community representatives, the superintendent is able to gauge public and school system perceptions of and satisfaction with the district's current work and its

future initiatives—and to solicit input. Parents and members of the school community report a sense of ownership over the district’s decisions and feeling vested in the district’s progress.

### **Performance and Accountability**

BISD has established staff evaluation procedures that hold both teachers and principals accountable for student performance while providing staff with support to achieve these goals. The district links teacher and principal performance goals to their campus improvement plan, which itself is linked to the district improvement plan.

The teacher evaluation process starts at the beginning of the school year. The principal and the teacher review individual performance goals (set by the teacher in collaboration with the principal), school goals and student achievement goals. Collaboratively, the two parties establish strategies to achieve individual and school goals, defining the types of support the school and the district will provide to ensure the teacher can achieve his or her goals. Throughout the year, school leaders conduct walkthroughs to monitor teacher progress and, if necessary, to provide additional support.

Principal evaluations are conducted in a similar manner. At the beginning of the school year, the principal and the assistant superintendent who oversees that geographic region meet to establish goals, taking into account the district’s goals, the school’s goals and individual performance goals. They also discuss district-level supports needed by that principal to achieve such goals throughout the year.

The district provides support to teachers and principals throughout the year at varying levels, depending on the results of individual evaluations. Low performers at the district- and school-level receive extra support from the district. The type and amount of support—which could consist of, for example, embedded, targeted support from school-based colleagues or the district office—is dictated by individual and school need, and often differs from campus to campus, leader to leader and teacher to teacher.

### **Operations and Support Systems**

Research shows that the way in which district operations and systems are designed and implemented directly impacts how effectively the district can support teaching and learning at the classroom level. BISD bolstered learning and growth opportunities for students and teachers by instituting strong fiscal practices and by implementing a range of effective academic and enrichment programs for students. Teaching and learning in Brownsville is well-positioned for success because the district has specifically designed a range of professional development opportunities to meet the training needs of BISD staff.

### **Allocation of Financial Resources**

The superintendent and the school board have a steadfast commitment to provide funding that directly supports teaching and learning. For example, while the state requires a 65 percent contribution to instruction, the board and the superintendent have established a goal of committing 85 percent of federal and compensatory funds to instruction. A dedicated district staff member focuses entirely on identifying and applying for grant funding that will allow the district to deliver its intended programs. BISD has secured additional funding streams totaling \$1 million that ensure its ability to deliver its educational program and to provide opportunities for all students.

The district has put into place strong fiscal controls and financial management practices that ensure that the funds it does have are used wisely. For example, the district has consistently received superior ratings from the state, based on 21 criteria for financial performance. As an additional indication of its fiscal responsibility, the district purposefully monitors its own debt ratings even though it is unnecessary in Texas because the state guarantees debt for all districts, regardless of a low rating.

Finally, the district uses a transparent budgeting process to ensure that funds are appropriately allocated in a manner that best supports teaching and learning at the school level. Principals provide input into the budget process on a regular basis by participating in budget cycle meetings and informal communications. As a result, funds are distributed in accordance with the needs of each school and its students. Once allocated, principals have flexibility as to how funds are spent. Increased spending autonomy is given to principals who have a proven track record of using funds effectively and efficiently. Driven by the district improvement plan, the district also targets funds for specific, district-wide initiatives.

### **Organizational Structures and Management**

BISD is organized to support achievement and promote opportunity for the district's students in a safe environment. The district prides itself on the fact that it was named the safest school district in Texas during the 2006-07 school year. In addition, the district provides a range of educational services, programs and extracurricular activities that ensure a rich experience for BISD students.

The district offers a full spectrum of educational services for its students. Every school serves special education students through an inclusion model to ensure that all students have access to the general curriculum.

To ensure that advanced learners are being challenged, the district requires all teachers to participate in at least six hours of Gifted and Talented (GT) core training. Teachers who specifically serve the gifted population must be certified.

Bilingual programs are also available at every BISD campus. Decisions about student placement into and passage out of ELL programs is tracked and vetted by an advisory committee designated specifically for this purpose. The committee, made up of administrators and teachers, maintains records of each child beginning with his or her start in the bilingual program and then tracks each student's performance for two years after they exit the program to ensure they do not regress.

BISD believes strongly in providing students with a balanced education that includes arts, sports and other enrichment opportunities. For example, BISD has a very successful chess program that has been nationally and internationally competitive, an award-winning fine arts program and a music program also recognized at the national level.

### **Support for Teaching and Learning**

BISD offers a range of opportunities for staff to undergo professional development. Professional development is linked to the district improvement plan, which identifies district priorities. The district has embedded extensive professional development support within schools to support the specific needs of BISD administrators and teachers. In addition, BISD offers ongoing collaboration and planning between the district and schools to drive student achievement.

The district's improvement plan includes a district-wide professional development plan, approved by the DEIC, that is directly aligned with the district's strategic priorities, driven by student achievement data analysis. BISD has established district-wide professional development priorities and initiatives that are mandatory for all schools. In addition, the district allots schools three days during which school leaders can offer professional development to school staff based on their specific campus needs. Schools within a cluster also often combine resources and share professional development opportunities, providing staff the opportunity to collaborate with additional colleagues.

Common planning time is also a central element to BISD support for teaching and learning. District policy requires teachers to have a minimum of 45 minutes per day for planning. In focus groups, school leaders and teachers reported that their schools often provide even more extensive planning time. Across grade levels and schools, staff have clear expectations for how to spend this collaborative meeting time, which occurs vertically across grades, horizontally across subject areas and separately by subject area.

*For more information about Brownsville's best practices, please visit [www.broadprize.org](http://www.broadprize.org) and/or contact Drue Brown, public information officer, at [dbrown@bisd.us](mailto:dbrown@bisd.us) or 956-548-8008.*