



## Ysleta Independent School District

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### District Profile\*:

- Rank among U.S. school districts (by size)\*\*: 114
- Number of schools: 62
- Number of students: 44,746
- Number of teachers: 3,068
- Per pupil expenditures\*\*\*: \$8,302

\*2010/11 data, unless noted otherwise

\*\*2009/10 data

\*\*\*2008 data

**Superintendent:** Hector Montenegro was superintendent of Ysleta Independent School District (YISD) from 2003-2008. He began his career in education in 1975 and held positions including teacher, assistant principal, principal and assistant superintendent. Prior to Montenegro's role as superintendent in YISD, he was superintendent in San Marcos, near Austin.

Roger Parks was interim superintendent from January 2008 to February 2009. He began his career in education in 1965 and served as superintendent of Gadsden School District before retiring in 2001.

Michael Zolkoski was appointed superintendent of YISD in March 2009. He has 39 years of experience in education as a teacher, assistant principal, principal and education consultant. Before his appointment in YISD, he was superintendent in Tulsa, and the Texas districts of Brownsville and Judson.

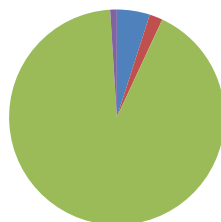
**Governance:** A seven-member board of trustees is elected from single-member districts for staggered three-year terms.

**Union:** Texas is a non-union state.

### Student Characteristics:

- Percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price school lunch: 81%
- Percent of students designated as English language learners: 24%

### Student Demographics:



- White 5%
- African-American 2%
- Hispanic 93%
- Other 1%

## **Student Achievement**

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- In 2010, Ysleta outperformed other Texas districts serving students with similar family incomes in reading and math at all school levels (elementary, middle and high school), according to The Broad Prize methodology.
- Between 2008 and 2010, Ysleta narrowed achievement gaps between low-income students and the state's non-low-income students in reading and math at all school levels. For example, Ysleta decreased the income achievement gap by 5 percentage points for middle school math.
- Between 2008 and 2010, Ysleta narrowed achievement gaps between its Hispanic students and the state's white students in reading and math at all school levels. For example, Ysleta decreased the Hispanic-white achievement gap by 4 percentage points for middle school reading.
- In 2010, 84 percent of Ysleta's seniors participated in the SAT exam, the highest participation rate in all 75 Broad Prize-eligible districts.

## **Exemplary Factors Related to Student Achievement**

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### **A powerful assessment data system allows educators to respond immediately and effectively to student needs.**

Teachers are able to continuously improve upon student performance in Ysleta ISD because a range of aligned, effective standards-based assessments allow them to closely monitor student progress. These include the state's annual summative tests, quarterly district benchmarks, assessments created together by teachers in grade-level teams at least every month (with the help of an online item bank to choose from), and a number of other tests used for placement and monitoring.

Those achievement data, along with attendance, behavior and other information, are fed into a system called DataMart, which was rolled out in 2005. DataMart provides longitudinal information at the district, school, classroom and individual student levels that is current and easy to read, manipulate and customize.

In Ysleta, the supply of robust student progress information has created demand. Teachers "are very hungry for data," says Sue Telehany, Ysleta's assistant testing coordinator, and are thoroughly trained on how to analyze it. They can look at their students' district test results item by item—on personal laptops provided by the school system—and see immediately what they need to reteach. They can see who on their team was most successful in teaching a certain concept, and learn from him or her how it was done. And if educators decide they'd like the data sliced in a new way, the DataMart software, which was created by the district, can be rewritten to accommodate that.

The data are systematically analyzed throughout the district for a variety of other uses, too: to determine interventions for struggling students (and how well those strategies are working); to determine professional development needs at the district, school and individual teacher levels; and to identify areas of weakness for schools that need to be addressed through the strategic planning process.

### **A culture of shared responsibility and a family-like environment ensure that everyone collaborates in the best interests of students.**

Superintendent Michael Zolkoski says that in Ysleta, "It's about the family." The system's educators—at central office and in schools—are an unusually tight-knit group. That's in part because El Paso is a relatively remote city, where many of the staff are homegrown. But it's also because of specific efforts by leadership to cultivate a culture of collaboration. In 2006, the district began an initiative inspiring staff to work together in a productive and fun way. Shortly after, working in teams was institutionalized in the form of professional learning communities (PLCs). Instead of working independently, teachers were now expected to share responsibility for student achievement and work together to accelerate it. The result, educators report, is a climate of mutual trust among educators—and impressive student growth.

Teachers and administrators all receive training on how to implement PLCs effectively, with student achievement as the goal. Within a school, teachers are organized into grade-level and

subject matter PLCs that meet at least weekly during common planning time. They discuss achievement data, individual students and strategies that are and are not working. After attending professional development workshops, they are expected to share what they learned with their colleagues. They tutor each other's students after school and infuse their instruction with objectives from each other's content areas.

Principals and assistant principals gather monthly to discuss common challenges and visit each other's schools to observe practices worth replicating. Superintendent Zolkoski leads a book study on various education and management topics for all principals across the district.

Teachers are used to having school and district administrators visit their classrooms, and their presence and the feedback that follows are seen as constructive rather than antagonistic. They say that when they need help, they feel very comfortable seeking it from administrators and instructional coaches within their schools and at the central office.

**Graduation and post-secondary education are aggressively promoted through a wide range of intensive personalized student supports.**

Ysleta ISD has worked hard to make college not just an aspiration but a reality for its students. Families begin hearing about the SAT exam at parent events in sixth grade, and students must take the SAT, and apply to a college, in order to graduate. The district pays for the PSAT and SAT for students who need the assistance. Students achieving at high levels on state tests are encouraged to enroll in advanced classes, and every high school offers a dual-enrollment course of study with a local community college.

And because you can't get to college if you don't make it through high school, in 2009 the district began a program called No Senior Left Behind. Administrators keep spreadsheets that track each student's progress toward Ysleta's graduation requirements: grades, credits, scores on state assessments that graduates must pass, SAT administrations and attendance, which cannot be below 90 percent.

A district-wide taskforce, with representatives from each school, meets monthly to share ideas on how to ensure at-risk students succeed. At the school level, the data are monitored daily by assistant principals and counselors. Throughout the year, any student falling short of the requirements is aggressively pursued—and supported. For example, school staff meet regularly with the students and their parents and teachers. They track which interventions have been tried, and which others might help. Online credit recovery, through a program called Education2020, is provided for students who missed or failed classes. Students with attendance problems can recoup hours by going to tutoring before or after school, as well as Saturday school.

Educators in Ysleta are tenacious about this particular mission; they don't release students from the net of support even after they have left school. At Parkland High School, for example, counselors are still tracking dozens of students from as many as four years back, trying to help them pass the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills so they can finally get a diploma.

Since No Senior Left Behind began, the number of seniors who do not graduate on time has reduced fivefold, and the graduation rate has increased 8 percentage points.

**Teachers and administrators have an abundance of meaningful, targeted professional development opportunities and instructional supports.**

Educators in Ysleta can access a wide variety of professional development offerings throughout the year, online and in person. So can teachers in many other urban school districts. What distinguishes Ysleta ISD is its comprehensive efforts to match professional development to what any given school, team or teacher needs at that moment.

Professional development in the district happens for a reason. Teachers can seek out courses they want, but they typically do so based on teaching and learning weaknesses revealed in student achievement data. They are also steered, in teams or individually, toward particular training by principals, school improvement teams, instructional coaches, area superintendents—anyone who has looked at student test scores or teacher evaluation data to assess areas of need.

Teachers also get regular assistance from instructional specialists in the content areas, both at the school and district level, who help identify problems, plan lessons and model effective instruction. For struggling schools and teachers, those specialists form improvement teams that may visit several times weekly.

In Ysleta, teachers are not pulled out of class for professional development. In 2009, the district began what it calls the Holiday Exchange: Teachers attend training over two days of summer break, and in turn get two extra days off over winter break. As well, teachers are trained on staff development days, Saturdays, after school and during common planning time. A reduced need for substitute teachers saves money and ensures greater continuity for instruction.

“You’ve got to keep Michael Jordan and Scottie Pippen on the floor if you plan to win. They cannot be on the bench,” Zolkoski says. “So we have our teachers in the game at all times, and that’s truly making a difference.”

New teachers in Ysleta meet with a mentor monthly for at least three years to receive help in classroom management and instruction. New administrators are assigned mentors too, and principals who are struggling are paired with retired administrators who are brought back to help.

School principals and district administrators in Ysleta are taught not just to be effective managers but also hands-on instructional leaders, diagnosing strengths and weaknesses in teaching and helping to devise solutions. In addition to formal observations, principals are expected to do at least 144 classroom walkthroughs every school year, spending up to 15 minutes in each classroom and giving specific, actionable feedback within hours or two days at most. Area superintendents and instructional specialists conduct regular classroom walkthroughs, with feedback as well.

Area superintendent Rick Lopez holds a competition among the principals under his charge to see who can visit classrooms most often. “The expectation,” he says, “is to be highly visible.”