

## Socorro Independent School District, Texas

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### District Profile

Rank among U.S. school districts (by size):	146
Number of schools:	40
Number of students:	38,696
Number of teachers:	2,451
Per pupil expenditures*:	\$7,696

**Superintendent:** Robert Durón was superintendent from 2003 to 2006, prior to which he was assistant superintendent at Clear Creek Independent School District, outside of Houston. His 25-year career in education includes positions as a teacher, assistant principal, principal and adjunct professor.

Charles F. Hart was interim superintendent from August 2006 to December 2006. Previously he was the superintendent for Canutillo Independent School District, also in El Paso.

Sylvia Atkinson was superintendent from January 2007 to June 2008. During her 16 years as an educator she was a teacher, human resources administrator, adjunct professor, executive director of human resources and superintendent at three Texas districts.

Mary Benham, then assistant superintendent of financial services, was interim superintendent from June 2008 to June 2009.

In 2009, Socorro hired Xavier De La Torre as superintendent. De La Torre came from the Elk Grove Unified School District, Calif., where he was associate superintendent for human resources.

**Governance:** A seven-member board of education is elected from five area districts, with two at-large positions, for staggered three-year terms.

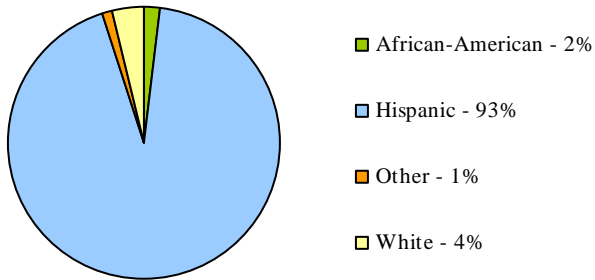
**Teachers Unions:** Texas is a non-union state.

\* Total expenditures per pupil in 2006-07. Source: U.S. Census Bureau

Student characteristics:

Percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price school lunch: 73%  
Percent of students designated as English language learners: 26%

Student demographics:



## **Student Achievement**

- In 2008, Socorro outperformed other districts in Texas that serve students with similar family income levels in reading and math at all school levels (elementary, middle, high school), according to The Broad Prize methodology. In addition, between 2005 and 2008, Socorro showed greater improvement than other Texas districts serving students with similar income levels in reading and math at all school levels. Socorro's results on these two measures—performance and improvement relative to similar districts around the state—were in the top 2 percent of all Broad Prize eligible district results.
- In 2008, a higher percentage of Socorro's low-income students performed at the highest achievement level on the state assessment compared to their state counterparts in reading and math at all school levels. In addition, a higher percentage of Socorro's Hispanic students performed at the highest achievement level on the state assessment compared to their state counterparts in reading at all school levels and in elementary and middle school math.
- Between 2005 and 2008, Socorro was more successful than the state in increasing the percentage of students—students overall, and low-income and Hispanic students taken separately—who achieved proficiency in reading and math at all school levels. For example, between 2005 and 2008, the percentage of low-income students who achieved proficiency in high school reading increased by an average of 7 percentage points each year, compared to a 4 percentage point increase for the state.
- Between 2005 and 2008, Socorro narrowed achievement gaps between its Hispanic students and the state average for white students in reading and math at all school levels. In addition, Socorro is narrowing achievement gaps between its low-income students and the state average for non-low-income students in reading and math at all school levels. For example, between 2005 and 2008, the district's low-income students narrowed the gap with the state average for non-low-income students by 18 percentage points in middle school math.

## High Impact Factors Behind This Success

- **At the district level, Socorro predicts which students may be at risk of dropping out, monitors them and makes sure they catch up academically early on.**

During the 2005-2006 school year, Socorro created an At-Risk Management System (ARMS)—a tracking database to identify which students are at risk of dropping out. The database was built on 13 academic and behavioral criteria defined as drop-out predictors by the state of Texas. Those criteria, which apply to students starting in kindergarten through high school, also define when students are no longer considered at-risk. Using the ARMS database, teachers and campus-based at-risk intervention coordinators can track a range of student outcomes, including when a student performs poorly on a readiness test in first grade, as well as when a student earns sub-par grades in two courses in any grade. Campus coordinators inform teachers when their students are identified as at-risk. They then work with teachers to develop a plan for each student, review that student’s progress every six weeks and ensure that students who are no longer considered at-risk are appropriately removed from the program.

“The ARMS system gives teachers a one-stop, handy reference of research-based interventions for at-risk students,” says Assistant Superintendent Cynthia Lopez. “In maybe five seconds you can look at attendance, grades, schedule and interventions teachers have provided in previous years.”

Designed to ensure that educators consistently respond when students are at-risk and to provide educators with best practices to help them choose appropriate interventions, this online resource contains a drop-down list of 150 research-proven interventions teachers can select and track.

The ARMS system also serves as the database for counselors, principals and social workers similarly working to prevent students from dropping out. Given that all interventions are archived, district officials are able to sort out what does and does not work for a particular student.

- **The district focuses on keeping at-risk students in school.**

To keep at-risk students in school, Socorro runs an Academic Reinforcement Mentoring Initiative (ARMI), which has paired nearly 1,400 “mentor teachers” with students who are in danger of dropping out. These teachers mentor a group of 10 to 16 students at a time and spend at least 60 minutes every other day providing direct, intensive instruction to their students—during the regular school day, within one of the mentor teacher’s planning periods. Mentor teachers also assist students in setting personal academic goals for the year aimed at improving each student’s particular grades, attendance and state test results. At least once every three weeks, mentor teachers are required to document the progress they are making with each student on the district’s online ARMS system.

The impact of ARMI is obvious to anyone visiting classrooms in this district. At Socorro High School, for example, theater teacher Troy Herbolt acts as a mentor in another teacher's ninth-grade remedial reading class. "I help keep them focused on their work, check on their grades. I can see not only how they're doing in this class but in science or other classes as well. It's one more teacher keeping an eye on them."

Also obvious is the intense involvement of Socorro administrators who personally call parents of struggling students. Says Socorro High School Principal Miguel Serrano, "After the first three-week assessment, the administrators take a list of the kids who don't do well, divide it up, and we call the parents to bring the students in for tutoring."

Socorro also offers credit recovery programs, career and technical education and licensure, early college partnerships with the local community college, and alternative high schools for students who have failed in a traditional high school setting—all to engage students with different interests in a variety of ways.

- **To boost academic performance by English language learners (ELL), the district invests heavily in a specialized teaching technique called "Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol."**

The Sheltered Instruction Observation Protocol (SIOP) program trains teachers to differentiate instruction for English language learners by making content topics more meaningful based on students' different learning styles and backgrounds.

In classrooms where SIOP techniques are being used, for example, visitors see content and language objectives posted on the walls and teachers reviewing these objectives with students before the lesson begins. Colorful "Word Walls" decorate the classrooms, and vocabulary words always coincide with the lesson and content being taught. Lessons are adapted to all levels of proficiency, from beginning to advanced.

SIOP lessons often include hands-on activities. For example, one Socorro teacher modeled the movements and behaviors of animals found in a particular biome. The lesson was paced to students' abilities, with teachers using interactive white boards to support student understanding. For example, if the biome lesson referred to concepts or objects unfamiliar to new immigrant ELL students, such as giraffes, the teacher could download photos of giraffes onto the whiteboard.

Teachers using SIOP lessons may also move students into groups of three, providing the opportunity to practice new language tasks with peers of different language levels. At the end of each lesson, the teacher provides feedback to students and allows them to check their work against a rubric that she has placed on the wall for self assessment.

Encouraged by the program's success in raising student achievement for English language learners, Socorro has committed to training all teachers, not only those with ELL students, in these strategies. Since 2007, more than 1,200 Socorro teachers have been trained at two-

day SIOP Institutes run by a third-party vendor. To expedite the dissemination of SIOP instructional techniques within schools, the district uses a “train-the-trainer” model, where teachers who attend the sessions then go back to their schools and train other teachers. Because the district has so many ELL students, it can easily integrate them into virtually any class and know that they will receive effective instruction.

- **The district underwent an organizational restructuring to provide more shared instructional leadership for schools and continuous district-school collaboration.**

An organizational change in 2007 created assistant superintendent positions that provide instructional leadership to feeder patterns within the district. “It allows the principals to have direct contact with our assistant superintendents, who are also instructional leaders,” says Assistant Superintendent Holly Fields. “Each cluster has unique needs. Some clusters, for example, have large concentrations of military families,” says Fields, referring to neighboring Ft. Bliss. “Other clusters have more high-poverty students.” The assistant superintendents communicate with each other as instructional leaders. “We don’t operate in silos.”

- **The district’s year-round academic calendar minimizes the degree of learning loss that typically occurs during long student breaks.**

During the 1991-1992 school year, the district implemented a year-round calendar at the suggestion of a 60-member community task force. The task force, which included students, parents, teachers and administrators, met more than 100 times to examine the issue. The task force concluded that a year-round school calendar would better serve the district’s growing student population than the traditional schedule. The resulting calendar now has four nine-week blocks of instruction, each followed by a two-week intersession break, as well as an eight-week summer intersession break.

Both educators and parents report high levels of satisfaction with this calendar, noting that students need less remediation and any content that still needs to be re-taught can be delivered again during intersessions where students have opportunities to master subjects one more time before the next nine-week block.

“At the secondary level, this calendar also gives students opportunities to recover credits,” says Assistant Superintendent Lopez, referring to a major priority in this district. Credit recovery efforts made during intersessions greatly contributed to Socorro’s high school completion rates exceeding Texas’ state average.

Although year-round schooling was initially begun to accommodate rapid growth in the district, it has now increased remediation opportunities for students and helped the district run a more cost-effective system because district facilities are no longer sitting idle during portions of the year. Says Fields, “It demonstrates to the community that by making sure our campuses are utilized, we are being diligent with taxpayer money.”