



Socorro Independent School District, Texas

District Profile*:

Rank among U.S. school districts (by size):	144
Number of schools:	41 (including two alternative programs)
Number of students:	41,357
Number of teachers:	2,493
Per pupil expenditures**:	\$7,699

Superintendent: Robert Durón was superintendent of Socorro Independent School District (SISD) from 2003 to 2006. Prior to his role as superintendent, he was an assistant superintendent at Clear Creek Independent School District, outside of Houston. His 25-year career in education has included positions as a teacher, assistant principal, principal and adjunct professor.

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

Sylvia Atkinson was superintendent from January 2007 to June 2008. She has held positions as a teacher, human resources administrator, adjunct professor, executive director of human resources, and as a superintendent at three Texas districts.

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

In June 2009, the district 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.

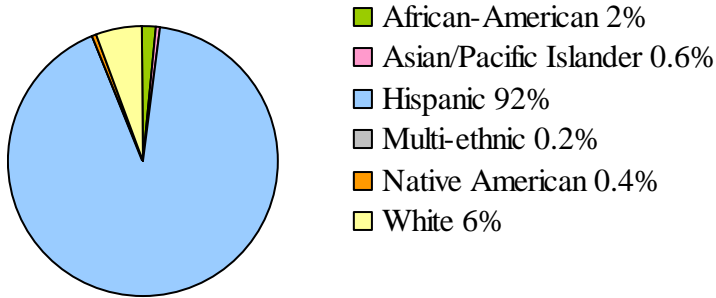
Student Characteristics

Percent of students eligible for free and reduced-price school lunch:	75%
Percent of students designated as English language learners:	23%

*2009/10 data, unless noted otherwise

**Total expenditures per pupil in 2006-07. Source: Common Core of Data

Student Demographics:



2008/09 demographic data

Student Achievement

- In 2009, Socorro *outperformed* other Texas districts 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 2009, a greater percentage of Socorro's low-income students at all school levels *performed at the highest achievement level* (Commended Performance) on the state reading and math assessments compared with low-income students statewide.
- Between 2006 and 2009, *SAT participation rates for Socorro's Hispanic high school seniors increased by 12 percentage points.*
- In 2009, 100 percent of schools in Socorro *met AYP*, compared with 81 percent of schools in Texas.

High-Impact Factors Behind Improved Student Achievement

- **Socorro routinely monitors and analyzes assessment data to make instructional and resource decisions.**

Every school day for 30 minutes, all Socorro Independent School District (SISD) middle and high school students participate in what is known as the “academic reinforcement mentoring initiative.” During this brief period, they review material or engage in activities that are designed to improve their scores on the Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS). Their teachers during this 30-minute period, who are different than their regular academic subject teachers, are also responsible for monitoring how students are progressing and then entering that data into the district’s “at-risk management system” database.

One administrator described this organization-wide approach to monitoring and intervention as “having an adult advocate who is looking out for you.”

This creative use of the school schedule is just one example of how the district has increased its emphasis on student assessment data to appropriately target areas in which students are weak. Test data are also used to determine whether students need additional intervention, what academic skill areas to include on future benchmark assessments, and what professional development programs teachers need.

District and school administrators have also changed their instructional practices when data reveal that a different approach is necessary. For example, when they discovered that high school students with different math schedules had different average test scores, they switched to a policy of requiring daily math instruction instead of every other day.

- **SISD staff monitor and evaluate the effectiveness of instruction and provide feedback to one another on how to improve.**

SISD’s “teacher induction program” is both a source of training for new teachers as well as a vehicle to support struggling veteran educators. Novice teachers are assigned mentors or coaches who can model effective instruction, discuss classroom management strategies, or provide coaching in any area the new teacher might need. These same mentors also serve as a resource for administrators who are developing action plans for underperforming teachers.

District leaders have created what one assistant principal describes as a “culture of walk-throughs,” meaning that principals and other instructional leaders are expected to spend at least half of their time in classrooms providing guidance and support. The same administrator says this practice has increased the level of trust that exists between teachers and administrators. The walk-throughs, however, are not intended only to determine if teachers are following the curriculum and keeping students engaged. Principals are also evaluated on whether they fully understand how to collect data, identify trends and make decisions that support teachers and students based on those data.

Common planning periods are also used as a forum to help teachers understand their students’ needs, learn effective instructional practices, and participate in targeted professional development. Teachers review lessons together, examine student work and share their instructional experiences.

- **SISD principals are true instructional leaders.**

Despite multiple changes in superintendents between 2005 and 2009, leaders across the district—especially principals—are credited with being highly effective instructional leaders who have been able to keep a daily focus on improving teaching and learning in the classroom. Teachers consider school administrators to be both skilled and knowledgeable about standards-based practices and in addressing areas where students are struggling. It was high school principals, in fact, who helped to design the innovative academic reinforcement mentoring initiative as a means of improving graduation rates because it helps students meet specific state standards they may not have mastered.

- **SISD holds all schools accountable and supports schools in improving their performance.**

Cynthia Lopez, an assistant superintendent in Socorro, describes the district’s philosophy toward under-performing schools as one of never giving up hope. “You offer support, and you offer more support,” she says.

All schools have access to a range of resources they can draw from to improve student achievement, including additional staff, professional development, guest speakers and parenting classes. Those schools that are struggling are provided more intense attention, which might include implementing research-based instructional practices or receiving special technical assistance to revise the school’s budget to make sure spending is aligned with specific academic goals. The availability of coaches, mentors and content specialists to help educators improve contributes to the sense that personalized support is on hand when needed in Socorro.

Professional development is intended to benefit not just the handful of teachers who attend the training—but all teachers. “There is an expectation that you will share with your peers,” one teacher says. “If not, you won’t be invited to do the training next time.”

Professional learning communities and common planning time are also used as mechanisms to replicate practices that have been effective in improving outcomes for students. For example, most schools used to pull special education students out of the classroom for instruction. But after teachers began offering feedback to colleagues on their success with the “class-within-a-class” model, it was implemented more widely in 2006. Under this approach, a special education teacher works alongside the classroom teacher to provide support to students in the regular classroom. Class-within-a-class then evolved into “co-teaching-within-a-class,” meaning that both teachers provide instruction to all students in small and whole group arrangements and students often don’t even realize who is receiving additional help.

- **SISD’s annual district improvement plan is developed using a systematic planning process that engages relevant stakeholders.**

A multi-step process is used to develop SISD’s annual district improvement plan. Each year, district leaders conduct a “comprehensive needs assessment,” in order to collect data on the current needs of students, staff and parents across the district, as well as other categories. The school board then uses the needs assessment to set goals for the coming year. With the input of an “educators professional advisory council” (EPAC), the district uses the board’s goals and the results of the needs assessment to develop the improvement plan. In addition to the EPAC, the district also invites community groups and student advisory council members to contribute input into the development of the plan.

Made up of representatives from each school—as well as community members, business partners and central office staff—the advisory council has been instrumental over the past five years in recommending several

practices focused on improving student achievement. These include literacy coaches for all elementary and middle schools, the ScanTek science enrichment program and PSAT, SAT and ACT preparation programs. The improvement plan is reviewed by district officials and the EPAC annually and is updated according to the district's changing needs.

Each school also has its own improvement plan, which not only summarizes what the local campus will do to improve performance in alignment with the district's improvement plan, but also provides specific information on progress at that site.