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## COMMENTARY

# Ector County Independent School District (TX): Building a Great Leadership Team to Supercharge Strategic Plan Implementation

*by Hector Mendez*

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# Ector County Independent School District: Building a Great Leadership Team to Supercharge Strategic Plan Implementation



| HECTOR MENDEZ

Looking back at the last 18 months in Ector County (TX), I am proud. However, getting here has not been easy, and our work is not yet done. This particular chapter of our district's history revolves around a new strategic plan and implementing a process to execute on it. Our district strategic plan was a document that was gathering dust; many on our team were either overwhelmed by the degree of change needed or simply did not know how to get things underway. By embracing a clear process, some new tools, and a team that learned how to work differently, we are now making rapid progress. I have often remarked that the last time I worked with such a high-functioning team was when I served in Vietnam forty years ago.

## Background

Ector County Independent School District (ECISD) completed a significant district-wide

strategic planning process in 2009. The work itself was unprecedented and exciting — we had never before codified our aspirational vision for the district in such a structured way. Nevertheless, about one year later, a community review presentation to our board and general public revealed that little real progress had been achieved since the plan was adopted. Like many districts around the country, we struggled with how to turn an aggressive, aspirational strategic plan into real results. But where many districts let their plan sit on a shelf gathering dust for three or five years until the next major review, our team decided to take action. The process we instituted to follow through on our strategic plan has resulted in dramatic cultural changes in ECISD's central office, as well as real results for the district and our students. There were three main areas that I want to emphasize here because these areas feel so different to many districts' normal way

of doing business and our old way of doing business. The three areas are: 1) the need to prioritize, 2) the need to switch from thinking about activities to thinking about outcomes, and 3) the need to rethink how the team works together to get results.

### The Need to Prioritize: Getting the Priorities on Paper

What was our problem? Why couldn't we just do what was laid out in the strategic plan? To start, our team counted over 70 initiatives in the initial strategic plan, with no prioritization amongst them. The lack of prioritization, and the long timelines involved, resulted in not knowing where to start. For many of our district's leaders, it was overwhelming. Where should we begin? What should we work on over the next 30 or 90 days? Also, we had narrowly assigned responsibility for discrete initiatives, which kept key decisions and authority within functional silos. People had little incentive to tackle challenges that crossed functional areas within the district. But like most districts, the majority of our key strategic issues crossed functional silos and would benefit from increased collaboration. Change was clearly needed. Further, the primary focus of most initiatives was on activities, not on the performance outcomes that the district really cared about. A common discussion

point was to ask: "Can we be successful at each of these activities and still fail at the desired outcome?" All too often, the answer was "yes." We engaged with The District Management Council (DMC) in 2010 to address these challenges and to help guide our central office staff through a planning cycle to create a more targeted execution of the strategic plan.

Our first step was to agree on our priorities. The district's initial strategic planning process included feedback from a variety of stakeholders, and was crucial in setting the vision and direction for the schools. The process created a lot of momentum and excitement within the district, but ultimately resulted in the creation of a comprehensive, detailed plan that lacked prioritization or practical guidance for implementation. With so many goals and plans, it was difficult for our leadership team to categorize them all, much less prioritize which should come first. As a result, a lack of alignment became clear between people's functional objectives and the district goals. Part of the problem was our classification of initiatives and objectives. Related objectives and initiatives were not "bucketed" or condensed into an overall objective, or even a broader area of focus. Each was treated as its own separate entity, further diminishing our ability to effectively manage them, as well as our ability to actually achieve them. With no direction about what to do, we stayed within the gravitational pull of the status quo.

My Superintendent's Leadership Team (SLT) is comprised of 11 top administrators, including assistant superintendents, the district's chief of staff, and various executive directors. As a first step in the transition toward a new systems-oriented way of thinking, the SLT developed a comprehensive list of all of the initiatives currently underway in the district. This included initiatives that were part of the district's strategic plan, as well as operational and daily goals. Tonya Tillman, our Assistant Superintendent for Business Operations, took the lead in compiling what is known as Ector's "out-there list." This is a list of goals and initiatives that were not on the strategic plan but that, due to the lack of alignment between the plan and people's functional priorities, often ended up taking priority. These initiatives are "out-there" for a variety of reasons; however, since they do not directly relate to the strategic plan, they are often detrimental to the focus the plan is intended to create. ▸

#### Ector County Independent School District (TX) Fast Facts

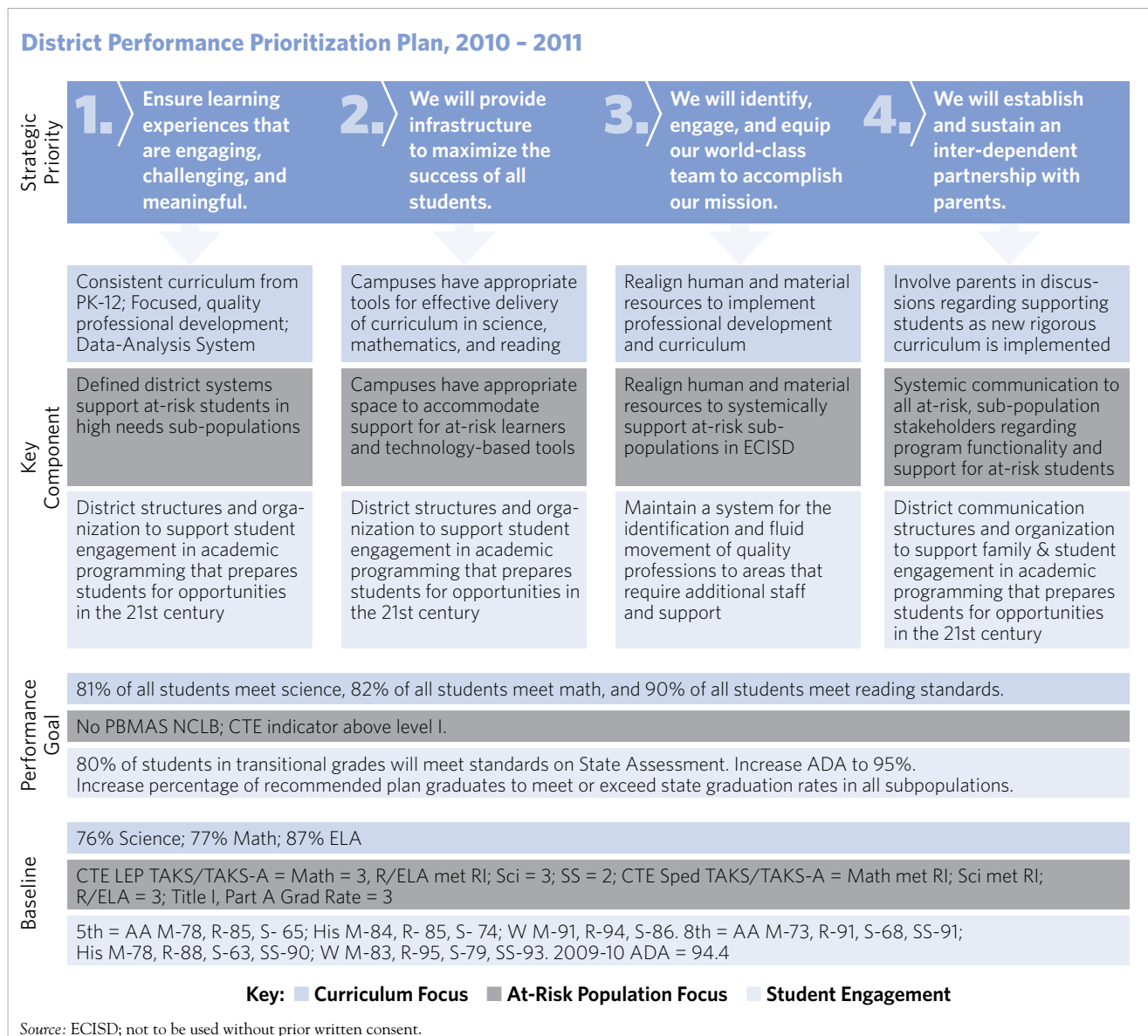
- Founded in 1921, now the 43rd largest school district in Texas
- 27,400 students (2010-2011)
  - Hispanic: 63.9%
  - White: 29.1%
  - African American: 5.3%
  - Asian/Pacific Islander: 0.9%
  - Native American: 0.8%
- 40 schools
- Permian High School Football team was the basis for the book and movie *Friday Night Lights*.
- \$214,239,505 total budget (2010-2011)

Source: ECISD

Compiling these various lists of initiatives into one master list resulted in several important outcomes. First, the SLT could acknowledge all of the work that was being done in the district to help improve educational outcomes for children. Second, with such a long list, the need for prioritization became even clearer. Third, the SLT realized that prioritization actually could occur. Compiling a list of all of our initiatives along with a frank assessment of the importance and the amount of time spent on each was crucial to our ability to prioritize goals in a practical and actionable manner. This time, we worked to bucket our goals and activities, so that related goals were all kept together and could be used to build off each other.

As depicted in Exhibit 1, our priorities now fall into four levels, and are further coded by focus area. Articulating these priorities was not easy. Using the full list of initiatives described above, the SLT began to “bucket” the initiatives and rank them in terms of importance to the district and community. Our team worked to reduce the number of buckets — in the end, the resulting buckets reflected our major priority areas within the district: finance, curriculum and instruction, business operations, etc. The key components for each priority area are divided into three main strategic focus areas where ECISD seeks real change: curriculum, at-risk populations, and

EXHIBIT 1



### Strategic Abandonment Plan Review

Criteria	Proficiency (3)	In Need of Improvement (2)	Unacceptable (1)
<b>1. The program maintains a clear metric for measurement.</b>	The program's outcome or service rendered is defined, and a clear metric exists to measure the program on a frequent basis.	The program's outcome or service rendered is defined, but no metric to measure the program is available.	The program's outcome or service rendered is unclear and undefined.
<b>2. The program's outcome or service rendered is measured frequently and without undue bias.</b>	The program's outcome or service rendered is measured in an impartial manner on a weekly basis or better.	The program's outcome or service rendered is measured weekly, but bias cannot be eliminated from the evaluation.	The program's outcome or service rendered is not measured or no documentation exists to verify accountability.
<b>3. The program supports teaching and learning.</b>	The program directly supports teaching and learning through enhancing the educational setting, and faculty and staff can directly identify the tie between the program and instruction.	The tie between teaching and learning and the program is related upon evaluation. However, faculty and staff are not aware of the program's direct impact on instruction.	There is no close tie or a very limited tie between the program and teaching and learning.
<b>4. The program's service cannot be replicated otherwise.</b>	The program's service is specialized and must be provided by specially trained personnel to ensure effectiveness, efficiency, and safety to all the program serves.	The program's service can be provided by alternative personnel, but training and specialized supervision are necessary for the service to be conducted in an efficient, effective, and safe manner.	The program's service can be provided by alternative personnel with little to minimal training within the scope of the work day or work week.
<b>5. The program's cost-to-service ratio is defensible.</b>	The program's total cost divided by those it serves is better than what is found in similar districts without compromising the service it provides.	The program's total cost divided by those it serves is within normal estimations of districts with similar programs.	The program's total cost divided by those it serves is beyond the norm for similar programs in similar districts or industries.
<b>6. The program is operated by the best personnel.</b>	The program is administered by personnel who are familiar with the program and who stay within timelines and budget the vast majority of the budget year.	The program is administered by personnel who are familiar with the program, yet personnel struggle to meet timelines or stay within budget.	The program is administered by personnel who are unfamiliar with the program or unable to execute the program's intent within acceptable timelines and costs.
<b>7. The program is necessary for the successful functioning of the district.</b>	Should the program not operate, the district would feel an immediate impact and the service would have to begin immediately for the district to maintain successful operation.	Should the program not operate, the district would function at a less-than-acceptable level, and the service would have to begin anew within a month of its service discontinuance.	Should the program not operate, the district would continue to function with minimal disruption within a semester or an academic year.
<b>RANGE</b>	17-21 = Proficient	13-16 = Needs Improvement	12 or Below = Unacceptable
Program Evaluator:			<b>Total:</b>
Program Evaluated:			Date:

Source: ECISD; not to be used without prior written consent.

student engagement. It is important to note that while these were not the only focus areas, they were deemed the top priorities. This distinction enabled the SLT to create much more actionable plans towards achieving these goals, and allowed a more strategic allocation of time, people, and money.

An important complement to this was to structure a process to strategically discontinue initiatives that were not working. "Strategic abandonment" is a process through which efforts that are not working are discontinued. A struggle familiar to many districts

is the challenge of having programs or processes sustaining themselves through inertia, rather than from their contribution to desired results. A formal strategic abandonment process serves as a vehicle to challenge that inertia.

Exhibit 2 shows our strategic abandonment rubric, developed by ECISD's Chief of Staff, Dr. Heliodoro T. Sánchez, known familiarly as "H.T." to our team, and based on a structure provided by DMC. Seven criteria are scored to form an overview of a program's performance. For each ▸

criterion, a program is given a score of proficient (worth three points), in need of improvement (worth two), or unacceptable (one point). The SLT uses the total score in its discussions of the relative merits of initiatives. With limited resources to spread around, reallocating time, people, or dollars away from projects that deserve abandonment through a regular review process is highly compelling. Moreover, the strategic abandonment process serves as a means to refresh and revitalize the full initiatives list.

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### Switching from Activities to Outcomes

Developing a comprehensive list of current district initiatives went hand-in-hand with revising our district goals. Ector's strategic plan comprised six strategic goals, each with a number of sub-goals, all

generally more focused on activities rather than outcomes. In meetings with DMC, each member of the SLT developed SMART goals (an acronym for goals that are specific, measurable, actionable yet achievable, relevant, and time-bound) for his or her branch of the organization.

SMART goals are outcomes-oriented goals — that is, they focus on the outcomes that will result from actionable steps rather than the actions themselves. Goals were divided into three time frames (short-term, medium-term, and long-term), thus facilitating their prioritization and encouraging follow-through. SMART goals help ensure that all activities are aligned towards larger

district *outcomes* goals. As a result, everyone in the organization knows how their actions contribute to the greater performance of Ector County students.

Besides creating outcomes-oriented goals for each department, the goal-setting exercise forced the SLT to work together to create SMART goals for the district as a whole. We chose to focus goal-setting on academic achievement, and move outwards from there, essentially subordinating financial and operational goals. As an example, we knew that facilities were an issue, in terms of both over-crowding and under-utilization for our general and special education students. Previously, our goals had been along the lines of “decrease over-crowding” and “improve facilities.” These action-oriented goals gave way to the following outcomes-oriented goal: “Establishment of an ECISD comprehensive, academically-focused facility plan.” This goal covers a broad array of activities, including planning for, developing, and opening our New Tech High School (opening this fall!) and the work we are doing to open our Early College High School in time for the 2012-2013 school year.

### Change How the Team Works Together

Team-building is a difficult subject to tackle. We believe that great teams don't come together through traditional “team-building” exercises, but rather through the work itself. Dr. Sánchez outlines very nicely the following three key changes that allowed the SLT to execute the strategic plan more effectively:

1. Changing *what* the SLT talks about: using a simplified “one-pager” distillation of the strategic plan to focus the discussion.
2. Changing *how* the SLT talks: establishing SLT behavioral norms and a decision-making process.
3. Refining *when* the SLT talks about it: recreating the weekly meeting structures.

In addition to these three core elements, it became clear that a single individual needed to be responsible for running the ongoing process — and it was not me! Dr. Sánchez, who previously served the district as Assistant Superintendent for Accountability and Special Populations, was named Chief of Staff to reflect his expanded role and commitment to man-



Students in ECISD have benefitted from the district's new approach to strategic plan implementation.

aging the new process. I recognize the importance of having a passionate and skilled leader perform this role in any district, and Dr. Sánchez is a great example of effective leadership.

#### **Change What the Leadership Team Talks About**

Prioritization of goals meant the SLT needed to align each of their various functions so that everyone could work towards the same shared goals, and could understand how their work contributes to reaching that goal. Once the priorities were determined, the SLT developed a one-page distillation of the strategic plan. We wanted a game plan that teachers could have; we wanted a one-pager that communicates what our main priorities are (Exhibit 1).

This “one-pager” has been crucial to the transformation of the school district in a number of ways. Its simplicity is incredibly valuable, especially considering the district's overly broad and under-utilized strategic plan. The strategic plan had too many goals and too little alignment and prioritization to become actionable. A one-page document does not have that problem. It can be easily carried around, and teachers and leaders can constantly refer to it during their decision-making processes.

Distilling district initiatives onto one page provides focus and prioritization. Teachers and district leaders all know what the goals are on the one-pager, whereas most do not know all of the goals in the longer strategic plan. Such focus and alignment ensure that everyone is working towards the same goal, thus promoting a higher level of teamwork and creating more efficiency in accomplishing those goals. Additionally, the one-pager allows for clearer communication between the SLT, teachers, community members, and other stakeholders. Clearly and concisely relaying the contents of a dense strategic plan is next to impossible, but a one-page distillation of that plan is much easier to digest and communicate. All district leaders are now promoting the same theme and goals; this reduces any potential communication error or misunderstanding. The commonality of the theme makes it easier to create community buy-in. Community members and other stakeholders know exactly what the district plans to do, and exactly how they can help achieve those goals.

The simplicity and focus of the one-pager encouraged greater alignment and accountability of the SLT. Since all members of the SLT were now >

focused on achieving the same goals, it became easier to develop specific action steps that each member of the SLT would need to take to reach those goals. This level of teamwork enabled the systems-focus of the district. All members of the SLT, from the Assistant Superintendent for Business Operations to the Executive Director of Athletics, were tasked with working towards the goal of improving student academic achievement. Of course, the specific action steps for each member of the SLT differed according to their role, but the alignment of their mission was vital for creating the type of systems-thinking that helped change the district mindset and buck the status quo.

Our next hurdle was to make things more time-bound. While the one-pager was a major breakthrough for the SLT, after three months, everything was “red” — we had essentially achieved nothing. We then implemented 90-day plans — short-term goals that fit into the long-term strategic plan and one-pager, and assigned accountability to members of the SLT for each initiative. Still, at the end of the first 90-day period, little had been achieved. What was the missing component?

#### Change How the Leadership Team Talks

Our team praises H.T. Sánchez as the catalyst in terms of helping us make the shift. As Chief of Staff, Dr. Sánchez changed the structure of SLT meetings by instituting accountability checks into each meeting. He made a note of each member’s action steps, and asked for reports and updates

at the weekly meetings. The meetings are now entirely different. We used to meet for three hours and not accomplish a thing. Now, the meetings are very focused. Everyone has a part and reports out. As a result, our SLT made great strides during the second 90-day plan, and is now on warp speed. Our leadership team feels a great sense of accomplishment, which not only encourages more improvement, but also further promotes teamwork and systems-thinking. I know that team members are motivated to conduct their own meetings in a similar fashion, creating a cascade effect down through many levels of the district.

Decision-making in a school district can be very complex. Cabinet-level executives must be able to function at a high level to enable and support key decisions and strategies. Using the power of the 90-day documents and clear priorities, we were able to change the nature and focus of the regular team meetings. As a starting point for changing the nature of the dialogue, the SLT committed itself to a new set of behavioral norms. We identified dysfunctional behavior, such as conveying inaccurate/incomplete information and requesting a decision be made, making decisions based on individual wants and overtly neglecting broader needs, ignoring the agenda, focusing on posturing and emotions as a basis for decision-making, and passing off responsibility for district decisions. Then, we committed to exactly the opposite. The resulting norms are shown in Exhibit 3.

### EXHIBIT 3

#### SLT Norms: Functionality & Focus

SLT Norm	Norm by Definition or Example
<b>1. Transparency</b>	Data-based; accurate depiction of information; comprehensive review of facts; knowing what you know and how you know what you know
<b>2. Systemic/Inclusive Decision-making</b>	All stakeholders have a venue to provide input; moving past one’s own self-interest; focusing on the District’s priorities; making the main thing the main thing; understanding the interplay among divisions; in pursuit of systemic success
<b>3. Honoring District Processes</b>	Submit items within timelines; be prepared; hold to meeting/process structures; no last minute items needing action without an opportunity to understand the full complexity of the issue
<b>4. Issue Resolution Focused</b>	Focus on issues not people; keep emotion in check; think systemically; don’t try to win just to win; don’t take it personally
<b>5. Shared Ownership of District Decisions</b>	Own SLT decisions; make the decision your decision; be prepared to convey benefit of decision to District

Source: ECISD



Superintendent Mendez talks to students in Ector County ISD.

As a reminder and reference, the norms are posted on the wall of the conference room where cabinet meetings are held. While the new SLT norms took a while to get used to, they are increasingly intuitive for the entire team. As Dr. Sánchez says, “We all needed to learn to get over personalization.” He summarizes the greatest impact as coming from a shift from individual autonomy to one of collective autonomy. Shared control is

With so many goals and plans, it was difficult for our leadership team to categorize them all, much less prioritize which should come first.

a powerful but unfamiliar way of doing business. Tackling cross-functional challenges — and most of our big challenges are cross-functional — is now much more likely to be successful. With content and behavioral norms in place, the SLT revisited our work process.

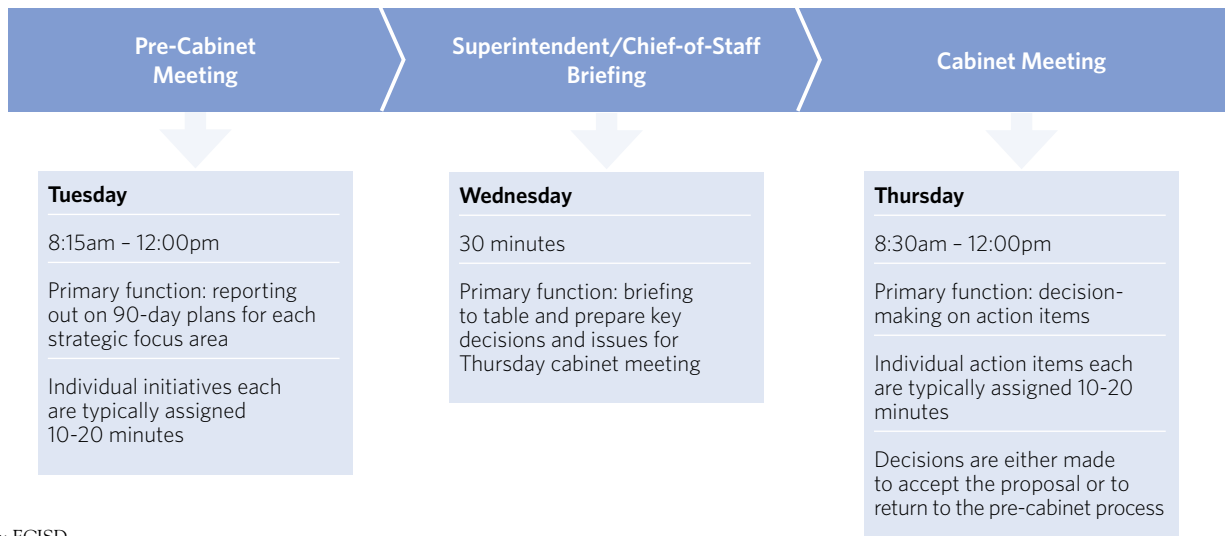
### Refine When the Leadership Team Talks

A standardized weekly schedule helps the decision-making process immensely. As shown in Exhibit 4, a weekly meeting flow now consists of two structured interactions with the SLT, and one additional briefing between Dr. Sánchez and myself.

The first meeting is known as “Pre-Cabinet.” The meeting lasts a full morning, is run by Dr. Sánchez, and does not include me! It is designed to review updates and specific issues from each of the three 90-day plans (curriculum & instruction, >

## EXHIBIT 4

### Weekly SLT Meeting Process



Source: ECISD



Superintendent Hector Mendez leads a discussion on ECISD's priorities and initiatives.

student engagement, and special populations), tackle specific challenges that may arise, and make recommendations to me for decisions that should be tabled. This meeting is exhaustive; individual initiatives typically consume 10-20 minutes of dis-

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cussion each, and the team is often able to discuss up to 15 initiatives. Dr. Sánchez is the leader of the meeting, and forces discussion to move on when stale, all the while holding members accountable to the norms and to their goals. Ector Communications Director Mike Adkins plays the role of “time cop” to keep the meetings on schedule.

There is a second meeting between Dr. Sánchez and myself where I am briefed on details from the Pre-Cabinet session. This is followed by the full Cabinet meeting, where I give direction to the full team and engage in decision-making with regard to specific action items. The weekly process is now a smoothly running machine, although it did take our team a number of months to get to that point. The full power of the process was realized when it was successfully combined with the other components. Once that occurred, dramatic increases in productivity occurred. In summary, we changed what we talk about, how we talk about it, and when we talk about it.

A great example of the change we have seen in the district as a result of this new meeting process is our Virtual High School. The Virtual High School (VHS) offers a variety of standard high school courses online, allowing students flexibility in their high school experience, and encouraging on-time or early graduation. Previously, the VHS program operated on both high school campuses and at a stand-alone facility, where it shared space with other district programs. Through our newly implemented strategic abandonment process, we determined that resources should go

to the two high school campuses, rather than to all three facilities. This change allows the VHS program to be run more effectively and efficiently at the high school campuses, while also returning funds to the high schools for computer lab improvements and software expansion. Thus, abandoning the stand-alone facility will actually improve learning opportunities for our students, as the program will be better run and high schools will be more adequately equipped for all students, not just those participating in the VHS.

### Conclusions

We believe our current successes — one campus has earned ‘Exemplary’ status on the state assessment, and thirteen campuses have achieved ‘Recognized’ status — are the direct result of the strategic alignment and prioritization of district initiatives that led to specific, implementable steps the district could take towards improvement. Our leadership is now a high-functioning team and has been able to tackle other challenges, such as developing a new district diversity plan.

The importance of these two major catalysts for change — people and accountability techniques — cannot be overlooked. In Ector, they go hand-in-hand. Our team implemented accountability techniques based on outcomes-oriented goals we developed, which in turn helped drive the collaborative efforts centered on one main goal. Some members of the SLT were critical in the development of the goals and 90-day plans. Understanding how to develop outcomes-oriented goals can be hard, even for people who have done it before, especially if there is little data that can be used for benchmarking. Having a sophisticated understanding of these types of goals, and how to help others develop them, is a critical part of our success in Ector County, and another instance of how we came together as a team.

But other people are important here, too. We worked to engage the school board in the goal-setting decisions, resulting in a restructuring of the board and their governance work. Restructuring meant that the board and the SLT are now better aligned, and are working towards the same goals. The increased alignment between central office

staff and the board is crucial to creating stakeholder engagement and improving operational efficiency. By including the board in the decision-making processes, we let the school board develop ownership for the district direction and goals. This, in turn, increased the cooperation between the board and central office, creating a larger systems-thinking focus and improving district relations.

In summary, we changed what we talk about, how we talk about it, and when we talk about it.

We hope that other districts can learn from our improved leadership and decision-making. We know that these are common struggles. Distilling the strategic plan into a one-page document helps force alignment and prioritization of goals. Creating a short-term plan with strict accountability measures ensures the achievement of those goals. SLT members are given timelines for accomplishing their specific action steps, and must report on the progress they have made in meetings with their colleagues. That each person helps develop their own action steps ensures buy-in, and the accountability timeline allows progress to be shown. Ector ISD is still a work in progress, but that increased buy-in and teamwork have gone a long way towards improving student achievement in our district.



**HECTOR MENDEZ** HAS SERVED ECISD IN A VARIETY OF ROLES FOR THE PAST 31 YEARS, BEGINNING AS A CLASSROOM TEACHER AND WORKING HIS WAY UP TO ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT FROM 1993-2007. HE

WAS APPOINTED SUPERINTENDENT IN 2007. AS SUPERINTENDENT, HE AIMS TO ENGAGE ALL OF HIS DISTRICT'S STAKEHOLDERS IN SUPPORTING AND SERVING THE STUDENTS OF ECTOR COUNTY. HE EARNED HIS BACHELOR'S DEGREE FROM ANGELO STATE UNIVERSITY, AND A MASTER'S DEGREE FROM THE UNIVERSITY OF TEXAS AT PERMIAN BASIN. MR. MENDEZ CAN BE REACHED AT [HECTOR.MENDEZ@ECTORCOUNTYISD.ORG](mailto:HECTOR.MENDEZ@ECTORCOUNTYISD.ORG).