

A Collaborative for Academic Excellence

El Paso's partnership program boasts impressive gains in student performance

Photos by Scott Weaver, Black Star, for CrossTalk

By William Trombley
Senior Editor

EL PASO, TEXAS

AT THE H.D. HILLEY Elementary School, close to the U.S.-Mexico border, more than 70 percent of the students enter first grade speaking little or no English, and more than 90 percent are poor enough to qualify for the federal lunch program.

Many of the children live in "colonias"—groups of shacks and trailer shells which often have no electricity, running water, trash pickup or sewer lines. These settlements are illegal but they exist in ever-increasing numbers, according to school officials.

Yet test scores at H.D. Hilley have shot up in the last three years. For instance, in 1996 only 60 percent of Hilley's fifth graders passed the reading portion of the state-mandated Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS), but this year 94 percent passed. In mathematics, the pass rate for fifth graders jumped from 74 percent to 92 percent.

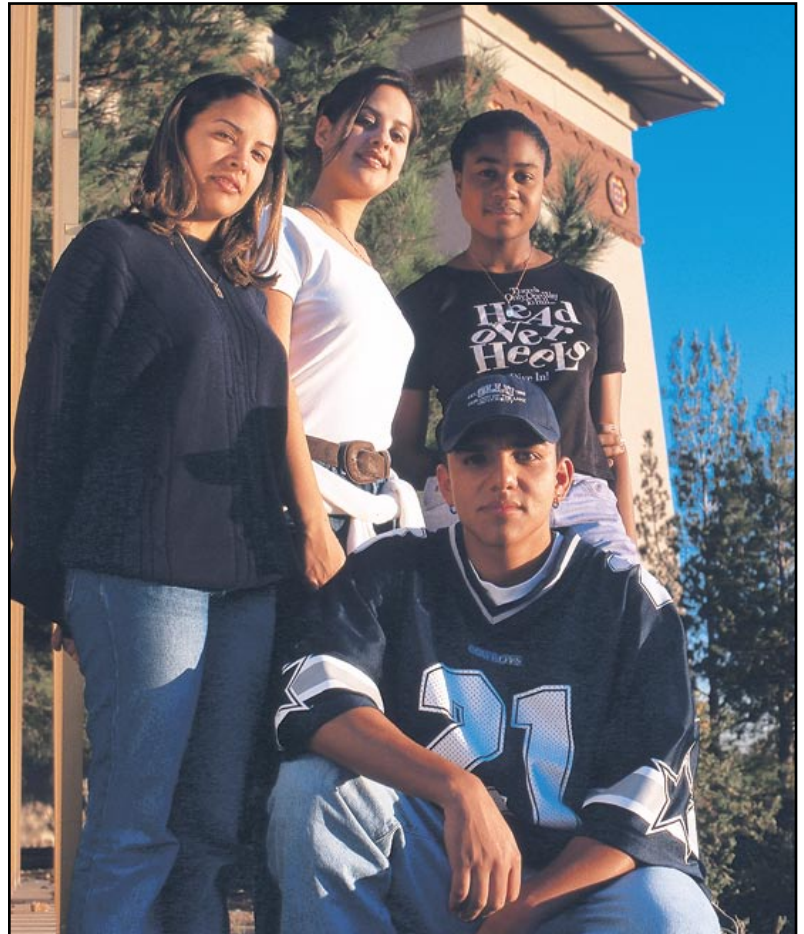
"I'm in seventh heaven, seeing what the children can do," Principal Ivonne Durant said.

Durant gives much of the credit for this improvement to the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence, a partnership that includes the University of Texas-El Paso, El Paso Community College, the three largest school districts in the area, and local business and civic leaders.

"There is no question in my mind that we have made some huge gains and that much of it has been due to the Collaborative," Durant said.

Because of the partnership, Hilley has a math and science "mentor," Freddie Vasquez, an experienced teacher who helps the school's 35 classroom teachers with math instruction. Vasquez is one of 39 mentors who work in the three school districts—El Paso, Socorro and Ysleta—that are part of the Collaborative. The money to pay the mentors comes from a five-year, \$15 million grant from the National Science Foundation.

Hilley, which is in the Socorro School District, also has a "literacy leader," a teacher who has been freed from regular classroom duties to help other teachers find ways to improve student reading and writing.



Two-thirds of the students at the University of Texas-El Paso are Hispanic. Many of them will teach in area schools after graduation.

All of Hilley's classrooms are connected to the Internet, allowing youngsters who might come from homes without telephones or electricity to learn about modern communication. Beginning with first graders, each student has an e-mail account. Last fall, fourth graders worked on a joint project with a school in a remote area of western Australia.

Money for the computers, Internet connections and other technology comes from a \$10 million U.S. Department of Education grant.

A prominent feature of every classroom at H.D. Hilley, as in every other Collaborative school, is a huge wall chart titled "El Paso Standards for Academic Excellence," spelling out the skills that each student should have mastered by fourth, eighth and 12th grade, in seven subject areas. The chart was developed over a two-year period by teachers, parents, school administrators and university faculty members.

The school has a "parent center," offering everything from

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computer instruction to classes on healthcare and stress management for parents, mostly mothers, of Hilley students.

“This is not just a school effort, it’s a community effort,” Durant said, explaining the importance of involving parents in the school’s work.

The special programs and extra equipment are important, but perhaps equally important to H.D. Hilley’s success is the belief that every student in the school is capable of learning, if provided with encouragement and the tools to do so.

That is the basic message of the El Paso Collaborative.

“We believe all students can learn at higher levels, given the opportunity,” said M. Susana Navarro, executive director of the Collaborative. “We put it in moral terms—all of us

are morally obligated to teach all students.”

That is also the belief of President Diana S. Natalicio of the University of Texas-El Paso, whose strong commitment to the Collaborative is a major reason for its success.

“This is a very critical piece of our mission because our student population is primarily drawn from this region,” Natalicio said in an interview. “Eighty-five percent of our students come from El Paso County schools.” (Another eight or nine percent cross the border every day from Juarez, paying the same tuition as Texas students.)

“Some years ago, I came to the conclusion that there was very little sense in pointing a finger of blame at anybody for the inadequacy of the preparation of students coming out of the high schools when, in fact, we were preparing a majority of the teachers who were teaching in those schools,” she continued. “It made a lot more sense for us to try to take ownership and be a stakeholder in educational achievement at all levels. That’s what we set out to do, and we were very fortunate that Susana Navarro entered the picture here about that time.”

After several years as director of the Achievement Council, a California organization that works to improve educational opportunities for minorities, Navarro returned to her native El Paso in 1991 when her husband, Arturo Pacheco, was named dean of the College of Education at Texas-El Paso.

At first, Navarro thought of starting an independent, community-based organization similar to the Achievement Council, but she was persuaded by President Natalicio to base the effort on the Texas-El Paso campus. Today the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence has a staff of 25 and an annual budget of about \$5 million, with most of the money coming from the federal government and from the Pew Charitable Trusts and other private foundations.

Natalicio chairs the organization’s board of directors, which includes superintendents of the three participating school districts, the president of El Paso Community College, the mayor of El Paso and other business, civic and religious leaders.

In the three participating school districts, two-thirds of the children come from low-income families and half enter the first grade speaking only limited English. The Collaborative works with 142 schools in the three districts, intensively with about 80.

An early task was to organize “leadership teams” in the first group of schools that agreed to join, and lead them through three-day seminars, during which the message was pounded home that “all children can learn, given the chance,” said Alicia Parra, deputy director of the Collaborative.

The teams included teachers, counselors and administrators but no school could participate if its principal were not part of the team. “The principal has to be on board if the school is going to make real change,” Parra said.

“I think these seminars were a turning point,” she added. “We were able to personalize education in the minds of teachers and principals. We told them, ‘This is your opportunity to create a school you would send your own child to.’”

The Collaborative continued the leadership team seminars for three years and also added “subject matter institutes,” at which Texas-El Paso faculty members and outside experts worked with school teams to improve instruction in math, science, reading and writing.

The Collaborative does not promote any particular curriculum materials but does insist that these be “standards-based,” and the standards are spelled out in the detailed wall charts that hang in every participating classroom.

For instance, in science, one of nine competencies that fourth graders are expected to master is the ability to “use hand lenses, binoculars, microscopes, thermometers, cameras, computers and other instruments for scientific investigations, observations and experiments.”

In mathematics, one of six fourth-grade standards is to be able to “recognize typical patterns in number relationships and begin to express them symbolically” and “apply these algebraic skills to analyze problems, using developmentally appropriate mathematical representations.”

“This is not just a school effort, it’s a community effort.”

**—H.D. Hilley Elementary School Principal
Ivonne Durant**

In addition to providing schools with math and science mentors (at a cost of well over \$1 million per year), the Collaborative has launched a campaign to improve student reading and writing skills in its member schools.

The mentors usually are welcomed with open arms by elementary and middle schools but they get a mixed reception in the high schools.

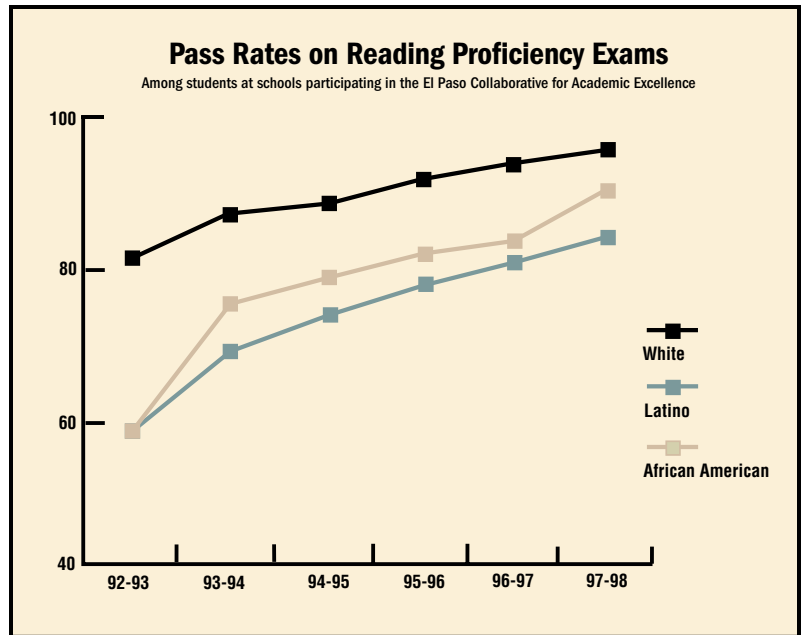
“Some high schools don’t want to be involved,” said Veronica Hernandez, a high school mentor in the El Paso School District. “Some teachers don’t see the need because their students are doing well on TAAS, and others like teaching calculus to small classes of the best students. They don’t want any part of the idea that all students should be taking these classes that get them ready for college.”

The Collaborative holds continuing leadership institutes for principals, subject matter workshops for teachers, meetings with parent groups and meetings with university and community college officials, to align the high school curriculum with college admissions requirements.

The result of all this activity has been a sharp rise in test scores and other measures of achievement.

Among the 80 schools participating fully in the program, the gap between the passing rate for white students and passing rates for African American and Hispanic students on state-mandated math and reading tests has been reduced by almost two-thirds in the last five years.

Five years ago, 15 schools in the three participating districts were classified by the state as “low performing” but no schools carry that designation today. The number of



“recognized” or “exemplary” schools identified by the state has increased from a handful to more than 75.

Although most of the work to date has been in elementary and middle schools, there are also signs of improvement in the high schools. Dropout rates are still high but there have been steady increases in numbers of students taking algebra 2, chemistry, physics and other college preparatory classes.

“The kids have gotten the message that this isn’t going away, and they’re starting to do the work,” said Monica Martinez, a Brown University graduate who has returned to El Paso to work with the Collaborative.

The Ysleta school district now requires all high school juniors, most of whom come from low-income families, to take the Scholastic Assessment Test (SAT) and to apply to at least one college. If a family cannot afford the SAT fee, the district pays it.

“In the past, too many of these kids thought college was out of reach,” Navarro said. “Ysleta decided to tell students, ‘Look, there’s no mystery here—you take the classes, you take the SATs and you have a good chance of getting to college.’ I think it’s a terrific idea.”

These gains have not come without some pain.

The *Chronicle of Higher Education* recently reported that in the Ysleta district, more than half of the 51 principals and two-thirds of the 3,000 teachers either have retired or have taken jobs in other school districts in the last six years.

Navarro thinks the numbers are “exaggerated” but concedes that the radical changes involved in the Collaborative’s approach to school reform make many people uncomfortable.

“Any time you try to bring about real change, some people are going to be upset,” she said. “When you raise these issues, some people will ask, ‘What have we been doing? What are

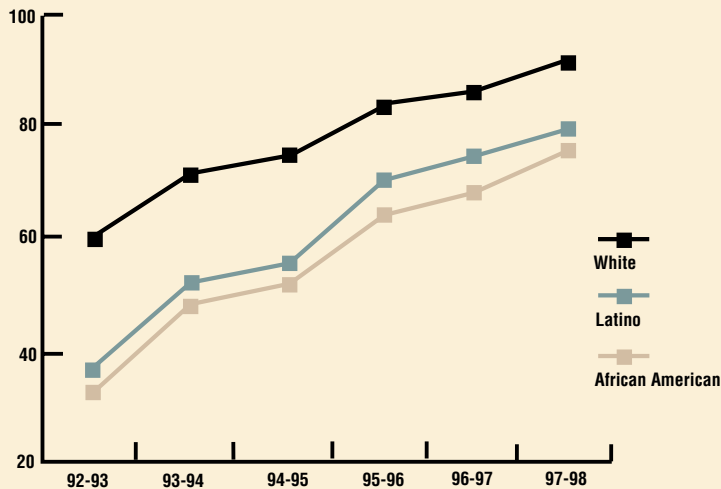
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University of Texas-El Paso President Diana S. Natalicio supports the Collaborative’s work enthusiastically.

Pass Rates on Mathematics Proficiency Exams

Among students at schools participating in the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence



the values behind what we have been doing?’ And they will chose to move on.”

Navarro dismissed the notion that personnel changes are easier in the El Paso area because there are no teachers’ unions.

“With or without unions, education systems have not been very good about dealing with teachers who shouldn’t be in education,” she said. “For most principals, it has been part

of the culture that you just had to live with bad teachers.”

Support from the University of Texas-El Paso has been critical to the Collaborative’s success to date.

“The university has been very important,” said Ivonne Durant, principal at the H.D. Hilley Elementary School. “They light the fires.”

President Natalicio, Provost Stephen Riter and deans of the various colleges all are committed to improving the local public schools.

Lack of adequate preparation “is not just a problem for El Paso, it’s a problem that pervades all of American higher education,” said Riter, a systems engineering professor who has been provost for four years.

“Our schools are not equipped to turn out a lot of students who are prepared for college, even kids who took all the right courses, did all the right things,” he said, “so we have decided we have to change the system.”

Some of the biggest changes have occurred in the College of Education, which trains at least 60 percent of the teachers for El Paso County schools.

“We are fortunate to have a kind of closed loop,” said Arturo Pacheco, dean of the college. “We are the only four-year institution within 250 miles (in Texas, that is—New Mexico State University is only 50 miles away, across the state line in Las Cruces), we train most of the teachers, two-thirds of our students are Hispanic, and we have three large school districts to work with. We can see the results of our work.”

Subject matter courses have been beefed up. Prospective elementary school teachers now take many more math

UPDATE El Paso’s Collaborative June 2008

THE EL PASO COLLABORATIVE for Academic Excellence, first described in the winter 1999 issue of *National CrossTalk*, continues to contradict the widely held belief that partnerships between K–12 public schools and postsecondary education are ineffective.

The Collaborative, which includes the University of Texas-El Paso, El Paso Community College and 12 El Paso County school districts, has succeeded in improving the performance of K–12 students, increasing the numbers who move on to postsecondary education, and narrowing the achievement gap between white and minority students.

This has happened in a region in which 88.5 percent of elementary and secondary students are Hispanic, and 75 percent are low income.

M. Susana Navarro, executive director of the Collaborative, points to these indicators of success:

- In 2002, only 47 percent of the region’s students in grades three through 11 passed all parts of the statewide Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS); by 2007 that had that increased to 70 percent.
- The high school graduation rate in the area’s three urban school districts was 78.3 percent in 2006, up from 69.4 percent in 1995.
- The high school dropout rate of 21.7 percent is substantially lower than in 1995.
- The numbers of students enrolling in some form of postsecondary education are inexact, but enrollments at the University of Texas-El

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Paso (UTEP), and at El Paso Community College, both of which draw most of their students from local schools, have been growing rapidly.

How did this happen? One reason for success appears to be close cooperation between leaders of the two postsecondary institutions and the local school districts. They meet regularly to plan projects and thrash out problems.

Continuity of leadership has been important. UTEP President Diana S. Natalicio has chaired the Collaborative’s board of directors since 1993 (the program began in 1991). The board also includes the president of El Paso Community College, superintendents of the three urban school districts and representatives of business, civic and religious organizations.

M. Susana Navarro has been executive director from the beginning. Natalicio and Navarro “provide a history of the Collaborative,” as district superintendents come and go, said Arturo Pacheco, former dean of the UTEP College of Education.

The Collaborative’s basic message remains the same. As Navarro

and science courses than before. They also spend three full semesters working in about 30 schools that are part of the El Paso Collaborative.

Federal funding will allow the college to offer a master's degree in educational technology to about 120 students over a four-year period.

However, the work of preparing teachers is not confined to the education faculty. Many faculty members from other colleges, especially the College of Science and the College of Liberal Arts, not only teach courses in the College of Education but also help create and evaluate curriculum materials and assist Collaborative schools in other ways.

Political scientist Kathy Staudt teaches a course titled "Schools and Communities" in the College of Education. "Fifteen years ago, no one from this department would have done this but now it's accepted, and I feel respected for what I do," said Staudt, who has taught at Texas-El Paso for 20 years.

"Many of our faculty—not all—have made a commitment to help with the training of teachers for the local public schools," said Thomas Brady, dean of the College of Science, who came to Texas-El Paso from the National Science Foundation a year ago. "You don't hear many saying, 'That isn't what I was trained to do—let the ed school do it.'"

But some faculty members say exactly that. Some were recruited by Texas-El Paso when enthusiasts were claiming it would someday become "Harvard on the border." They want to teach and do research in their academic specialties; they do not want to train teachers.

Another faculty complaint is that the El Paso



Every youngster at the H.D. Hilley Elementary School, a member of the El Paso Collaborative, has an e-mail account, and all classrooms are connected to the Internet.

Collaborative brings in outside experts to work on local school problems, ignoring local talent.

"In some parts of the campus, 'Collaborative' is almost a dirty word," said a mathematics professor who asked not to be identified. "The attitude of the Collaborative people seems

once put it, "We believe all students can learn at higher levels, given the opportunity?"

The Collaborative now works with about 50 schools, expanding from the original three urban school districts (El Paso, Ysleta and Socorro) to include nine smaller rural districts, Navarro said. The emphasis has shifted from elementary to middle schools.

A \$30 million grant from the National Science Foundation has enabled the Collaborative to train "coaches" who work with individual schools to improve math and science instruction. Over the years, additional financial support has come from the Pew Charitable Trusts, the Texas Education Agency and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

A decade ago the Collaborative faced opposition from some UTEP faculty members who argued that helping local public schools was not part of the university's mission. UTEP officials now say most of that opposition has melted away.

The faculty "is quite positive about what we have been able to achieve," President Natalicio said. "Even the skeptics are convinced that this is the way to go in a university that draws so heavily on local

The close cooperation between leaders of the two postsecondary institutions and the local school districts appears to be one reason for the success of the Collaborative.

students."

"Some junior faculty were apprehensive at first," Pacheco observed, "but feel they are more valued now, especially since some of them have gotten tenure."

"Working on K-12 problems is not a tenure requirement but it is highly valued, not buried away in the 'service' unit," said UTEP Provost Richard Jarvis.

The Collaborative's work with El Paso Community College "has gone in a little different direction" in recent years, according to Dennis Brown, vice president for instruction at the two-year college.

Disturbed by the large numbers of students who still required remedial courses, especially in mathematics, when they arrived on campus, the community college, along with UTEP and the three largest school districts, introduced a placement test in the second semester of the junior year in high school. Students who do well on the test are placed in college-level classes as high school seniors. Other students receive tutoring or other "interventions," Brown said. As a result, the number of students in remedial classes has dropped sharply.

El Paso Community College also has started two "early college" high schools, where students take college-level courses. Some earn 20 to 30 credits toward a bachelor's degree before enrolling at UTEP.

"All of this has happened because of the Collaborative," Provost Jarvis said. "The structure is simple—five or six people from the university, the community college and the three large school districts meet regularly" to plan and evaluate. "All this takes a lot of time," he added. "Collaborative relationships are extremely high maintenance."

—William Trombley

to be, 'El Paso schools are not very good and UTEP produced most of the teachers, so UTEP must be the source of the problem.'"

M. Susana Navarro replied that many Texas-El Paso professors have been involved but that academic research sometimes is not compatible with the goals of the Collaborative.

"Academics are thoughtful and careful—that's not the speediest process," she said. "We are after systemic change. We think the schools need to be changed. We think we know how to do it, and we want to do it as quickly as possible."

In any case, with the university president and other top administrators strongly committed to the work of the Collaborative, its critics tend to be circumspect.

"I wish I could say that everybody was absolutely, deliriously happy and marching to the same drum," President Natalicio said, "but I think there is a sufficient number of people who are committed at this point that we are making the progress we would like to make."

It is difficult to determine how much of a role working on public school problems plays in faculty tenure decisions at Texas-El Paso.

"Not everyone would agree with this statement, but I believe we have built public school work into the tenure guidelines in the College of Science," said Jack Bristol, former dean of the college. "Teaching and public service are now given much more emphasis."

But Ralph Liguori, professor of mathematics and president of the faculty senate, disagreed. "The Administration has been trying to build in (more credit for) teaching and public service," he said, "but the easiest thing to quantify is still research."

"We are certainly working on changing the faculty evaluation criteria, trying to inject some flexibility into the process," Natalicio said. "Not everybody has to teach prospective teachers, and not everybody has to be committed to that particular role of the university, but those who are committed to it should be rewarded."

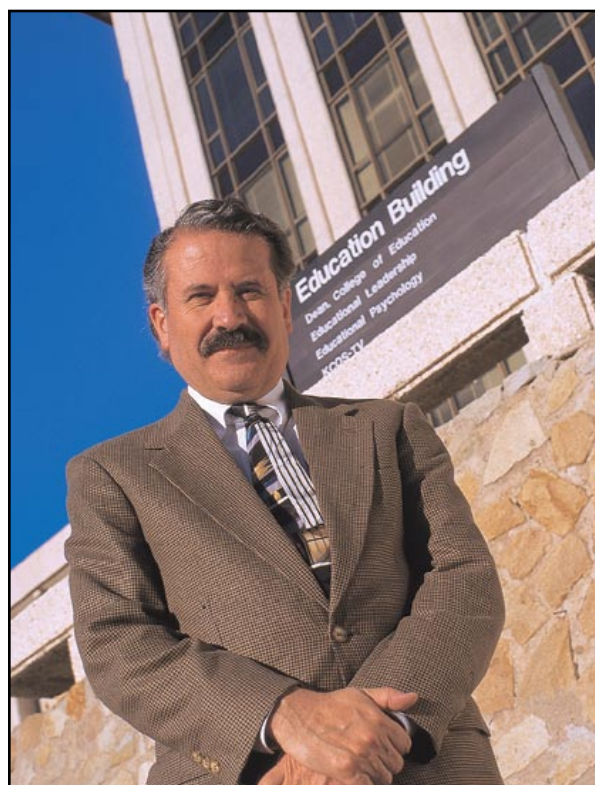
Some educators doubt that the El Paso success can be duplicated elsewhere. They note that the Collaborative operates in a geographically isolated part of the country, with a largely Hispanic population and with unusually strong support from the local university.

But Navarro scoffs at what she called "red herrings."

"The kind of poverty we have here, you don't see in most urban areas," she said. "If it can be done here, it can be done anywhere."

Kati Haycock, president of The Education Trust, a Washington-based organization that has been encouraging partnerships between K-12 and higher education around the country, thinks "the lessons are clearly transportable."

"At some level, El Paso has had an easier task because the environment is not as complex as, say, Los Angeles or Chicago," Haycock said, "but some things have been



Arturo Pacheco, dean of the University of Texas-El Paso College of Education, says it will take years to break down the barriers between K-12 and higher education.

harder. They're dealing with a porous border and a low-wage economy that employers like, so there's not as much community demand for higher achievement" as there might be elsewhere.

Few doubt that in the ten years Natalicio has been president, and in the six years of the Collaborative's existence, El Paso-area schools have made remarkable progress, and the mission of the University of Texas at El Paso has changed significantly. Teacher training, and helping the local schools, are now at the core of the university, not somewhere on the fringe.

But there are plenty of words of caution.

"Higher education and K-12 are two very different worlds, with very different cultures," warned Dean Pacheco of the College of Education. "We've got to talk to each other for a number of years before we start hearing what the other is saying."

Said Jack Bristol, "If you look at the data, clearly we're doing something right, but it will be several years before we know if our new teacher preparation efforts have paid off."

But those who run the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence are pleased with the results so far. "We have a long way to go," said Alicia Parra, the deputy director, "but in a community such as this, that never went anywhere, we have been able to move people." ♦

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