

Personalized College & Career Solutions: Three Barriers & Three Accelerators



Dallas ISD, Aldine ISD, & Garland ISD seeing, empowering, and supporting all students on their college and career journeys

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As a superintendent of schools, I stood on the stage at convocation at the beginning of each year to share a message that “this year we will see every student as an individual and help them open their gifts and accelerate their learning and growth.” I shared this truly believing in my heart that this was the work we should be doing. Reflecting on that message today it felt more like an aspiration than the plan it needed to be. As the former superintendent of Richardson Independent School District in Richardson, Texas, I have some new perspectives in my role of Board Chair at Economic Mobility Systems. EMS is a non-profit that helps communities and institutions see, empower, and support every learner through their educational journey into a good living wage job through timely data insights, leadership, technology, and change management. We help school leaders plan to achieve stronger and more equitable outcomes in a fast-changing community, policy, political, educational, and workforce context.

Leading change in big public-school systems is challenging. We will discuss three main barriers to leading toward stronger and more equitable college and workforce outcomes. Then illustrate how Aldine ISD, Garland ISD, and Dallas ISD are laying the groundwork required for all of us to understand how to plan and execute personalization at scale.

Three barriers: 1) purpose 2) systems 3) learning

Purpose: Superintendents have often viewed our leadership role to graduate students from high school. In large districts we run “at risk” lists and then run every student through interventions to help them meet high school graduation requirements without really understanding their unique needs and narratives. Over the last decade, many of us have begun to build stronger programmatic partnerships with colleges, employers, and communities that help students earn credits, credentials, degrees, and important work-based learning experiences. We are learning that there is a bigger purpose in our work. We must move from high school graduation as our purpose to being agents of socioeconomic mobility. This does not mean we abandon our focus on developing well rounded global citizens. It does mean we do this with the goal of helping students coming from economically disadvantaged backgrounds, chart a real and achievable path to earning a sustainable living wage and hold ourselves accountable for those outcomes. Purpose: agents of socioeconomic mobility.

Bright Spot: In Texas, the passage of House Bill 3 was a step in that direction, providing \$1.6 B in outcomes bonus dollars for school districts to help students test college ready and either earn an industry-based certificate, an associate degree, or enroll in a postsecondary program after high school. These new dollars will help school district leaders build the people, process, and program capacity to step towards our new purpose.

Systems: Our systems are not designed to place every student at the center of our work. We can’t see a real time 360 view of students to help everyone supporting that student make better decisions and then “case manage” to better outcomes by design. When you go into schools and really dig into the work with teachers, advisors, and administrators who are committed to student success, they are still building spreadsheets because they need

data from many different places in one place to make good decisions for students. We have a cycle with our data and technology leaders that plays out in the following way. Districts purchase more technology. District technology leaders are appropriately focused on student safety and security and require the technology vendors to build more data walls and processes. The walls to access the data become higher. The actual outcome of this cycle is that student data becomes less secure because educators still need the data, but now they pull it out into spreadsheets and begin to share that student level data across emails, thumb drives, and shared files to help students. Systems: data security AND interoperability + case management.

Bright Spot: The EdFi Alliance has been working across the country to help K12 leaders improve student data security AND help the data to become more interoperable across systems. What this looks like in practice is our systems begin to organize and move data in a more consistent way to allow us usable access to the data. Instead of every district figuring out how to move data, there is a consistent way that it moves so we can help each other use the data to support students. Texas school districts will soon be able to set up an operational data storage (ODS) with support from the Texas Education Agency to provide a path to improved data security and interoperability. Once data can be moved and matched safely and efficiently, we now need to talk about case management. Educators have too many places to log in. We must pursue a place where we can see a 360 view of the student and work together to support that student.

Learning: After decades of research on learning in American public high schools, we clearly understand that if students come in off track for college readiness, they leave off track for college readiness. Let’s look at how math plays out in our high schools. We traditionally have three tracks of math (1) honors (2) general (3) remedial.

Honors: These students come into high school on track for college readiness. They are more homogeneous grouped in honors classes by their math skills in the upper quarter of their class. They often get the best math teachers, who use whole group instruction that creates a “pace” for learning that is appropriate for most students.

General: These students come into high school on and off track for college readiness. They are more heterogeneous in their math skills spanning the next two quartiles of learning. Teachers use whole group instructional methods that create a pace that does not match the diverse needs of this heterogeneous group. Thus, these students do not grow in their math learning and development.

Remedial: Students in the lowest quartile are often stuck testing and retesting on state math tests required for high school graduation that do not align with college readiness skills or math skills required for the workforce. These students often experience a math class and a math remediation program. These remediation programs do not align with what they are learning in class. Thus, the students who are least equipped to connect the math learning dots of disparate programming are required to do so to somehow pass a state test and grow in their math skills. Learning: must evolve with proven personalized learning models.

Bright Spot: Texas College Bridge: COVID only accentuated these math disparities. To help more students prepare for college and demonstrate success on their first college credit-bearing math courses the Texas Education Agency launched “Texas College Bridge” with the NROC Project on the EdReady platform. This is a personalized math learning platform that includes teacher training. Students are given an assessment and then a personalized learning plan with teacher coaching and support. The system meets students where they are so that every student has a plan and pace that meets their needs. With over 600 school districts, 100,000 students, and a lot of data on students entering, taking, and passing college math courses, Texas has a model of personalized learning that should not be limited to remediation.

Three accelerators: 1) See 2) Empower 3) Support

We will illustrate how three Texas school districts that serve over 17,000 high school seniors annually (larger than 12 US states) are leading the foundational work of personalization at scale focused on socioeconomic mobility.



Aldine ISD “Seeing Students”: Aldine initiated a stronger college and career leadership and programming journey by analyzing historical data, setting bold district goals, and organizing a cross functional leadership approach. With goals that included college readiness and a minimum of six college credits for every student, Aldine quickly realized that data and systems were a barrier to execution. Economic Mobility Systems helped Aldine create a student journey map of priority data to include college readiness test scores and dual credit data from Lone Star College, financial aid and college application data from Apply Texas, industry-based credential information from across CTE programs, and all associated Texas CCMR A-F data. Under the direction of a college and career district leadership role, Aldine data and IT leaders began to organize and move the data into a College and Career Solutions Salesforce environment built by Economic Mobility Systems on the new student success hub architecture. Soon, district leaders were able to run timely and accurate reports to activate at the district level with cross functional college and career programming teams and out in the high school buildings.

Seeing every student with the ability to drill down to understand their needs is a big step 1 for leading this work. When leaders have the real time data organized accurately at the student level, there is an immediate lift. Aldine has added fully integrated and automated communication tools like texting for nudges and surveying, so when a student attends a workshop or coaching session, they click on a barcode, and it is automatically logged in their account. Aldine is building the 360 views of every student so they can SEE and understand student needs. In counselor user centered design sessions one counselor noted “We all want to hit district goals and we also want to serve the needs of each student. We don’t feel like we have the data and systems yet to be able to do both. We run a list, make a spreadsheet, and try to hit our district goals.” Aldine ISD listens to the educators on the front line and has responded with a case management system that can help educators hit district goals while providing the personalized support that each student needs and deserves.

Garland ISD “Empowering Students”: Garland recognized that students needed more power and agency in their college and career journey. After forming a district student leadership group, students began to share their user experiences in college and career programming and transitions. Through this learning, students had to rely on counselors and advisors at a ratio of 400 to 1 for many key functions like sending a transcript. Also, students often struggled to understand the document requirements for college enrollment. Garland brought in Greenlight Credentials and

started with moving student transcript information into a secure Learner and Employment Record (LER) in a student digital locker that students and parents can access and use. Student leaders began to outline the strategy to help their classmates understand the value and begin to adopt and use.

The Greenlight platform helps students not only have access to their transcripts, but it also helps them organize several important verified documents and begin to use those documents to access opportunities like scholarships, colleges, and work-based learning. For one important use case focused on college enrollment Garland engaged with Economic Mobility Systems to work with 40 students to understand the details of the college enrollment process at Dallas College, University of North Texas at Dallas, University of Texas at Arlington, Texas Woman’s University, and Texas A&M Commerce. Garland realized that the burden was almost always on the student to find and produce documentation. For example, college readiness as evidenced by ACT or College Board, meningitis shot records, proof of residency, fee waiver forms, proof of financial aid. Greenlight and Economic Mobility Systems developed a “College Enrollment Fast Pass” where Garland ISD now uploads verified records for the student like meningitis shots, college readiness, and proof of residency. Through student voice and user-centered design, students are more empowered at Garland ISD to own and use their data and records. In the summer of 2022, 2,500 of the 4,000 HS graduates sent their Garland ISD transcripts and many verified documents required for college enrollment without any adult intervention.

Dallas ISD “Supporting Students”: Dallas ISD and Dallas College have the largest ECHS/PTECH rollout of any urban school district in the country. With over 10,000 students engaged in associate degree programming that includes work-based learning with over 80 employer partners, supporting every student has been a challenge. School district, college, and employer data and systems were not designed to work together. After four years of leveraging Salesforce for coordinating the Dallas County Promise with the Commit Partnership, Dallas ISD and Dallas College partnered with Economic Mobility Systems to design a Personalized Pathway Manager solution built on the open Salesforce education data architecture. Seventy-six unique PTECH pathways were programmed into the solution and course level data from both Dallas ISD and Dallas College flows into a central Salesforce environment. Advisors at Dallas ISD and at Dallas College can now see and understand if students are on track with their pathway, what milestones are next, adapt to changing needs of students by customizing pathways for students, and project course and faculty needs in a more accurate and timely way.

This same solution is now being built into the CTE programming at Dallas ISD to outline and more effectively manage student career pathways at scale for the over 40,000 high school students across Dallas ISD. A cross functional college and career district leadership team meets monthly to move the work forward and outline a bold vision to develop outline 8-year plans for students that include their college enrollment into living wage jobs in partnership with colleges, universities, employers, and community partners. This approach is possible because of the investment in community data architecture, data storage, data movement, data matching, and data activation in a case management solution. Creating an accurate and real time single source of truth that produces a 360 view of every student is foundational for large systems to realize the vision of personalization at scale.

Personalization at Scale requires school district leaders to better SEE, EMPOWER, and SUPPORT all students in cultures of continuous improvement. Three large districts in Texas are helping to show us the way.

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