

## Case Studies in Community Partnerships no. 1

# Civic Cooperation in El Paso

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“Cooperation is an unnatural act,” a school superintendent once remarked. Indeed, most of the time most people go their individual ways, occupying themselves with matters close at hand – typically, family and job. Even people in prominent public positions tend to focus on immediate issues. The school board chair worries about how to cover an unanticipated surge in special education costs. The mayor concerns herself with a potential strike by sanitation workers. And so it goes; each actor responds mainly to daily pressures and routine expectations, not to looking at the big picture or to figuring out how to tackle large, cross-cutting problems. When major community issues emerge and draw wide interest, they are often contentious, with media attention focused more on conflict than cooperation.

The superintendent quoted above knows his terrain – it is not easy to bring diverse actors together into a common effort to address problems facing the community at large. Yet, on occasion it does happen. Civic capacity does manifest itself. People from varied sectors of life do sometimes make a joint effort around a common concern. In words and deeds, their civic sides come forward and their private and personal sides recede. This does not mean that everyone is caught up in a wave of altruism. Instead, diverse actors sometimes come to understand that, on a given issue, their fates are intertwined and that a combined effort can serve their collective well-being.

When this happens, we can speak of a locality’s civic capacity being mobilized. Civic capacity has two aspects: the development of a shared community concern and interaction around that concern – including contributions of time and resources to address the identified problem. The development of a shared community concern means more than vague awareness of a problem; it means seeing a problem as a matter of significant priority for the community. Furthermore, acting on a problem involves the willingness of key players to put aside any tendency toward being a “free rider” (letting someone else take care of it) and, instead, embracing a responsibility as a concerned member of the community.

A specific case in the public school arena – the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence – shows civic capacity in operation. The El Paso Collaborative provides an example

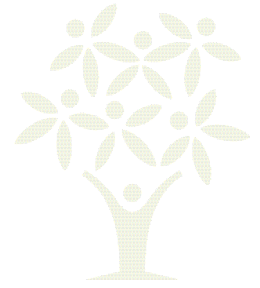
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of civic support for standards-based reform, particularly for the city's three urban school districts. These districts, in combination, contain 163 schools and enroll 135,000 students, of whom 85 percent are Hispanic and two-thirds are low income. About half begin school with limited proficiency in English.

The El Paso Collaborative has shown that civic cooperation around common concerns is possible. In the face of numerous challenges, the Collaborative has achieved significant accomplishments. In analyzing how one community mobilized its civic capacity in support of school reform, we can learn valuable lessons, anticipate some of the difficulties of such an endeavor, and take heart at the civic partnership's successes, even though some long-term challenges remain.



## Formation of the El Paso Collaborative

The creation of the El Paso Collaborative in 1992 came after a period of wide-ranging discussions around the joined topics of education and the changing economy, with special attention to the achievement gap between minority students and students from the state's majority population. Early participants in the dialogue included Sister Maribeth Larkin, lead organizer of the El Paso Interreligious Sponsoring Organization (EPISO) – an affiliate of the Industrial Areas Foundation; officials in the Chamber of Commerce; and President Diana Natalicio of the University of Texas at El Paso (UTEP).

Newly appointed to her position in 1988, President Natalicio set out to find ways of involving the university in the community and its challenges. EPISO, for its part, was especially interested in the example of the Boston Compact. With the prospects of a declining economic base as textile and other industries migrated from the United States, and with poverty on the increase among children and youth, business and government leaders had strong reason to give attention to the city's future and the part that education can play in an increasingly high-tech world.

The discussions gained sharp focus when Susana Navarro entered the picture. A native of El Paso, Navarro returned to the city with experience in civil rights work and in a leadership role in education reform through the Achievement Council in California. She brought to the discussions a clear vision of the need to combine standards reform with the equity aim of closing the achievement gap. Based on her experience in California, she was (and is) strongly committed to the idea that all children can achieve at a high level, as long as schools work effectively with that aim as a central focus.

Through her experience, Navarro had not only a clear vision of the goal to be followed, but also a concrete understanding of how to pursue it. She persuaded President Natalicio to base an initiative at UTEP. The Collaborative thus became an autonomous unit on the UTEP campus, headed by a broadly representative board, with President Natalicio as

chair. Joining her on the board were representatives of the business sector (the presidents of the Greater El Paso, the El Paso Hispanic, and the Black chambers of commerce), major officeholders in the government sector (the mayor and the county chief executive), and key education officials (the three school superintendents, the executive director of the regional service center of the Texas Education Agency, and the president of the community college), along with the lead organizer of E P I S O.



As executive director, Navarro was the Collaborative’s “champion” – that is, the driving force behind the initiative and the person with the know-how to make it happen. Sister Maribeth Larkin joined Navarro and Natalicio to form an inner core of actors with a close harmony of vision and complementary roles to play. President Natalicio was able to bring key people to the table. Larkin provided an important community base of support, and Navarro gave the initiative a concrete form that had strong appeal to the three school superintendents and also to a number of community groups enlisted as supporters.

In bringing the Collaborative to fruition, the inner trio of Navarro, Natalicio, and Larkin made use of a network of existing organizations, specially created task forces, and a general climate of concern. Drawing on an approach Navarro had developed in her work at the Achievement Council, they used indicators from the Texas Education Agency to highlight the general problem *and its equity dimension*. Significantly, in 1991, as the proposed Collaborative was taking shape, the state launched a system of accountability to be built around a new standardized test, the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills (TAAS).

The discussions from which the Collaborative grew were grounded in data but also extended to the big picture, making a connection between education and the fate of a border city long characterized by a low-wage economy. Discussions thus encompassed both the need to attend to the city’s economic future and a concern for the rights of lower-income children of color to a high quality of education and academic achievement.

For architects of the Collaborative, raising academic performance served as a way to further the social, cultural, and economic well-being of the city. It bridged concerns of educators and the business sector, and it provided common ground as the city’s leadership underwent a transition from a past of white, Anglo domination to a more diverse present. And it addressed the important equity goal of closing the achievement gap. By centering on the concrete, the Collaborative’s activities allowed old factional divisions to recede. The Collaborative thus got underway at a time when there was a felt need for greater cooperation.

Heading an organization with a distinct mission, Navarro was able to recruit a dedicated and focused staff. She also possessed good connections to the foundation world. Though it was a small operation at its beginning, the Collaborative was able to hit the ground running and, with the backing of the superintendents, quickly establish momentum.

## How the El Paso Collaborative Works

The Collaborative's approach includes paying close attention to curriculum and course requirements, along with fostering understanding of and support for standards-based schooling through both the use of data at key points and the involvement of parents and other members of the community. The central activity, however, is professional development for administrators, teachers, and staff. Expanding teacher knowledge of subject matter, especially math and science, is a matter of high priority. Deepening facility with a range of pedagogical approaches is also a priority. And a core feature of the Collaborative's approach is to reduce the achievement gap by building the commitment to teach all students a demanding curriculum.

From the beginning, the Collaborative saw that individual programs, while perhaps serving some students well, could not substitute for systemic reform, with whole schools as the basic unit of action. The launching of the Collaborative coincided with a state mandate for site-based management; the initial effort of the Collaborative was to encourage the use of data and self-examination to enable teachers, administrators, and parents to work together at the school level to develop a team approach. Thus, from the earliest days, the Teams Leadership Institute has occupied a central place in the work of the Collaborative and the development of principal leadership has held a high priority. Principals provide a vital link to parents and community, and they have been a key to building and maintaining site-level support for standards-based reform.

### Theory of Action: Teaching and Learning at High Achievement Levels

The overall approach of the Collaborative centers on a particular theory of action – that teaching and learning are at the heart of education reform. Professional development builds on that foundation and includes the idea that *all students can achieve at a high level*, from kindergarten through university (K–16); teachers, students, and parents must adhere to the expectation that rigorous standards can and will be met by all.

Because teacher quality is an overriding concern, it was a natural step for the Collaborative to work closely with the university's College of Education to align reform of teacher preparation with school reform. Under Dean Arturo Pacheco, UTEP became a member of John Goodlad's National Network for Educational Renewal, and the College of Education restructured its teacher preparation into a field-based program, working more closely with and inside the area's public schools as partners in the process.

In further pursuit of the idea that school reform is a K–16 task, the Collaborative is currently engaged in a mathematics alignment initiative to integrate curriculum, assessment, and instruction on an areawide basis. This initiative brings together math, science, and engineering faculty from UTEP with instructors from the community college and public school teachers to develop and put into practice a common framework of instruction.



## Civic Engagement

The university also houses the Center for Civic Engagement, which works with area schools to foster parent involvement. The Collaborative by itself is only part of a larger university partnership with schools and the community in pursuit of educational improvement. For example, the Collaborative, university administrators, E P I S O, and volunteers from the business sector are working currently to increase the level of college enrollment by talking to students about the importance of higher education in today's world and by disseminating information about scholarships and financial aid for college attendance.

In working with the three urban school districts (and in recently extending some of its activities to the smaller districts in the region), the Collaborative expects the schools to be active partners. The Collaborative does several kinds of professional development and is able to reach most of the teachers in the system. One strategy is to develop a small cadre of teacher-leaders who go back to work with their colleagues in their home schools but also maintain a wider network within the area. Part of the aim of systemic reform is to replace "egg crate" teaching with collaboration and exchange among educators, particularly among teachers.

The Collaborative is a manifold force. As an organization with a professional staff, it is an ongoing source of ideas. It is a provider of technical assistance and of tangible resources through its success in grant seeking. The staff is also a communication link to various elements of the wider community and to the help they can bring – for example, in the form of people who can talk up the importance of education and academic achievement.

The Collaborative's board is also an important connecting link for disseminating ideas and laying groundwork for high-profile work. Because the board meets on a regular basis and deliberates about priorities, it also serves as means for socializing newcomers, whether they be school superintendents, the lead organizer for E P I S O, chamber of commerce presidents, or a new head for the community college. In short, the board is a forum for highlighting the ongoing task of school reform and its importance for the future of the city. With many discussions grounded in data, the Collaborative centers the task on standards-based reform as a way to narrow the achievement gap.

At the same time, it should not be downplayed that the position of the Collaborative and its goal of systemic reform have been backed by major centers of institutional power in the community. The members of the board are the top officials in various organizations and institutions – the president of U T E P, the mayor, the president of the chamber of commerce, the lead organizer for E P I S O, and so on. Moreover, in February 2000, as the Collaborative approached its second decade, the executive director of the Collaborative and a leading business figure cochaired the El Paso Education Summit, which brought



together some 300 educators, parents, businesspeople, government officials, and community representatives to explore specific steps for the future. A number of task forces were created to pursue specific aims identified in summit discussions.

As a civic mobilization, the formation of the Collaborative brought together professional educators and a variety of community leaders around a common aim. For its activities, the Collaborative relies on a mission-minded staff, buffered from the usual bureaucratic careerism by its independent status, manageable size, and highly focused leadership.

Multisector representation on the board of the Collaborative, the ongoing work of the Collaborative with teachers and administrators, and the Education Summit are all evidence that, though cooperation may be “unnatural,” it is possible. Moreover, the Collaborative does not work in a vacuum but, rather, pursues its work as part of a recognized community priority. By holding neighborhood meetings to encourage enrollment in college and by making information available about scholarships and financial aid in these and other meetings, U T E P and E P I S O have taken steps that reinforce the aim of encouraging aspirations for higher education.

With Texas Scholars awards now available for students who complete the state’s “Recommended” curriculum, the financial hurdle has been lowered. Moreover, as part of the Think College Now/Texas Scholars Initiative, the Collaborative is currently developing and providing tool kits for schools to share with students about how to prepare for, apply to, and pay for college. It is also enlisting and training speakers from the business sector to go into the public schools to talk up the importance of higher education and encourage college enrollment. Such parallel and complementary moves among various players bear testimony to the extent to which educational achievement occupies a central place in the community of El Paso.

## Keys to Civic Mobilization

As described above, the El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence is an example of civic capacity at work, of how a shared understanding can bring social-equity and economic concerns together around a common purpose and sustain a continuing interaction in support of that purpose. In El Paso, that shared understanding, while championed by a few key individuals, grew out of a network of interpersonal and interorganizational links. It took shape through various committees and commissions as well as informal conversations, sometimes involving only two or three people.

But milieu alone does not guarantee civic mobilization. In this section, we will examine the key factors that allowed civic capacity to develop and thrive in El Paso.

First, a declining economy created a climate for acting on a broad set of concerns. For action to take place, however, someone needed to identify a crisis and frame it as a specific problem in need of urgent action. The convergent concerns of Natalicio, Navarro,



and Larkin provided that framework. Data on weak student achievement, high drop-out rate, and low college enrollment made the problem specific and concrete. With Navarro's prior experience to draw on, the Collaborative developed a concrete and proven solution to fit the problem.

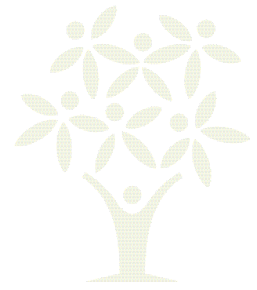
Skillful framing is thus one important step – identifying a problem broad enough to address the concerns of a wide cross section of civic and other community actors, while being specific and detailed enough about the problem and its solution to show that action could make a difference. Discussion in El Paso, as described by a participant, led to “a shared belief that something had to be done, that it had to be bold, and that it had to begin immediately.” In short, discussion conveyed urgency and identified a specific response.

A second leading factor for the successful mobilization of civic capacity is the credibility of the initiators. Whenever a body of civic and community actors comes together, it matters who does the inviting. It made a difference that the president of U T E P was not only the head of a major institution in the city, but also someone of stature, widely recognized for her leadership and accomplishments. And not only does it matter who does the inviting; it also makes a difference who sits around the table. The governing board of the newly formed Collaborative was both broadly representative and composed of important figures in the locality, which reinforced the credibility of the initiative.

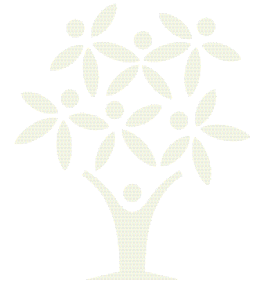
Credibility is also linked to a third key factor: resources. The El Paso Collaborative has enjoyed substantial corporate and foundation support, which enables it to employ full-time professionals and, with the backing of the school superintendents, to run high-quality, meaningful professional development. Often local nonprofits dealing with education and other issues of children and youth are shoestring operations in which the staff is under constant pressure to cut corners and to raise funds just to meet the payroll. By contrast, the Collaborative operated from the beginning in a seemingly secure position with ample backing to run substantial campaigns.

Furthermore, being housed on a university campus not only provided important support, it also highlighted the Collaborative's professionalism and expertise. Following through on initial support from Coca-Cola and the Pew Charitable Trusts, funding from the National Science Foundation and others has provided money and additional credentials.

The Collaborative has also enjoyed continuing support from and mutual exchange with Kati Haycock's Education Trust and John Goodlad's National Network for Educational Renewal. In her book *Common Purpose*,<sup>1</sup> Lisbeth Schorr calls attention to the important role that external intermediaries can play; El Paso's Collaborative has enjoyed such backing from its beginnings. Indeed, the Collaborative's relationship with national intermediaries has been two-way; at the same time that the Collaborative has made extensive use of prestigious resource people and connections, it has its own capacity to design, follow through, and sustain local engagement.



<sup>1</sup> Schorr, Lisbeth B. 1997. *Common Purpose: Strengthening Families and Neighborhoods to Rebuild America*. New York: Anchor Books/Doubleday.



State actions have been a fourth important factor. With TAAS initiated in 1991, standards-based reform gained a pillar of support; but that initiative did not stand alone. At the same time that statewide testing was launched, Governor Ann Richards and her commissioner of education, Lionel Meno, embraced teacher education reform. UTEP's College of Education was an early recipient of funding under this initiative and established the Center for Professional Development and Technology. The college put into place a field-based teacher preparation program that involves working closely with the Collaborative and with principals in the area. On another front, the Texas Scholars program provides a helpful boost in making enrollment in college more widely affordable.

The Collaborative has gained support by showing both the wider community and the school communities it serves that it brings concrete benefits. The Collaborative's success in garnering grants has brought significant resources into El Paso's three school districts. Moreover, from the beginning, the Collaborative's mode of operation has been to work *with* teachers and administrators, not to serve as a form of pressure on educators. Initiatives work best when they provide people with opportunities to do what they want to do. Professional development helps teachers and administrators to meet their responsibilities effectively and creatively, thereby enhancing the professionalism they often feel is intrinsic to their work but not always recognized by noneducators.

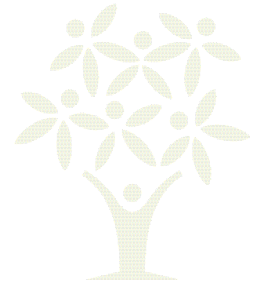
Working in a context of state-mandated accountability has also contributed to the credibility of the Collaborative. State testing provides a form of accountability, as do the various quantitative measures collected by the Collaborative. As the accountability system has evolved, the Collaborative has had an established position from which to work with educators in El Paso.

Mobilizing and maintaining civic capacity does not hinge on any one crucial step, nor is it a matter of simply aligning key factors into a self-sustaining equilibrium. It is a dynamic process that can go awry at any time. Competing demands for resources, the allure of new and different calls for action, emergent animosities, the coming and going of key actors, or simply the erosion over time of important interpersonal and related interorganizational connections are some of the ways in which an initiative could lose force.

It is therefore important that an initiative display signs of continuing momentum. The Collaborative gained greatly when its first program effort was enthusiastically embraced by one of the area's three school superintendents; he committed his entire system to participating from the beginning, building early drive. Substantial funding from the National Science Foundation, along with such events as the Education Summit, sustained momentum and gave the Collaborative an established place in the community.

The pull of alternative causes could still pose a threat. However, the Collaborative board provides a sustaining network. Its bimonthly meetings keep communication channels in operation, though not all members are dutiful about attendance. Connections to the

Education Trust K–16 councils and the National Network for Educational Renewal provide reinforcing infusions of ideas, support, and stimulation. Still, civic cooperation in El Paso is not problem-free, and there is a recurring concern that the community base for the Collaborative is not as broad as it could be – though in selected schools it is quite robust.



## Ongoing Challenges

**A**ny form of civic cooperation is at its base a coalition. While coalitions are characterized by a cohering purpose that brings disparate elements together, they also represent concerns and considerations that pull members in different directions. Unity is never complete; the danger of fragmentation is ever present. The El Paso Collaborative, like other examples of civic cooperation, experiences cross tensions.

### Friction between Business and Educators

One ongoing tension is the friction between business and educators. They represent quite different world views; each sees the other as having a flawed and incomplete understanding of the challenges in operation. One version of this tension centers on the desired end point of formal schooling. Many educators see completion of college for almost all students and postgraduate study for many as the ideal to pursue. Business employers often view their most acute need to be workers at intermediate levels of skill, with a larger component of applied education than that envisaged by educators.

Educators also see academic achievement as serving wider social, cultural, and civic goals, and not merely as a workforce goal. Moreover, college degrees provide credentials that facilitate mobility; thus, they do not in and of themselves anchor people to the local workforce. Along with some political activists, educators advocate for higher wages by local employers as a needed inducement to keep a skilled workforce in the local community.

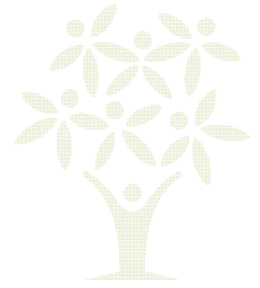
With this on-again-off-again debate, it is not surprising that much of the effort of El Paso's business sector goes into workforce development for noncollege graduates and that this effort is only tangentially related to academic achievement as educators understand it. The pull of conflicting priorities and the competing rationales on which they are based often get in the way of cooperation.

### Difficulty of Balancing Focus and Flexibility

The Collaborative, with its mission-minded staff, depends heavily on a clear focus for its task. The standards movement fits closely with such specific activities as professional development and curriculum reform. By contrast, such matters as family resource centers or broad issues of youth development are somewhat far afield from standards-based reform. Yet, initiatives in these areas, perhaps combined with early-childhood and after-

school programs, could contribute – even if indirectly – to classroom performance. Some schools run Head Start programs and, in the Education Summit, early-childhood development was raised as a matter in need of greater attention.

The Collaborative thus faces a continuing tension between maintaining a central focus and accommodating new issues and concerns. “Issue chasing” would diffuse what has always been a clear and consistent game plan. On the other hand, a flexible agenda could serve as a way to renew energy and expand impact. In a significant move, the Collaborative has recently extended its reach geographically to work with the smaller school districts in El Paso County. As does any reform initiative, the Collaborative faces the challenge of how to balance competing considerations. Its ability to mobilize civic capacity rests on continuing to achieve the right balance.



### **Instability of District Leadership**

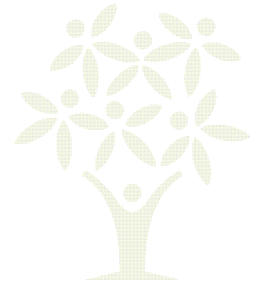
One of the worrisome features of the current scene is that at this writing (fall of 2002), all three urban school districts have acting or interim school superintendents. By contrast, over the initial several years of the Collaborative, the three districts enjoyed a period of significant stability in those offices. This allowed the establishment of a good foundation, which remains in place so far. But without firmer stability at the top and greater depth of cooperation at that level, some observers fear that good relations now in place with individual schools could falter, especially with the retirement of principals who have been an integral part of the Collaborative’s reform network.

### **Differing Willingness to Be Involved in School Board Politics**

The Collaborative and the university are, of course, not the only civic players actively concerned with education, as is evident from the wide participation in the Education Summit. Significantly, when the summit identified school board elections as a trouble spot, business-sector participants offered to take the lead in bringing about change and persuading school board members to give priority to student achievement. Over the past several years factional strife over such matters as who gets what construction and renovation contracts has sometimes occupied center stage among school board members. With growth in school enrollments ensuring that demand for construction is rising at a significant pace, the stakes are high in the contract-allocation game. The big dollars tied up in the process not only make it hard to keep conflict in check, but also tend to distract attention from education goals.

Business leaders, however, have taken some preliminary and modest steps to bring about change. They created a PAC, sought informally to encourage some candidates to run for school board, and used a questionnaire and interview process to rate candidates as qualified or not. The education committee of one business group is in the process of meeting individually with school board members to urge them to focus their main attention on student achievement and make it an overriding priority. They take their cue from one of the goals set in the Education Summit: to “establish a regional campaign, led by business

leaders, parents, and community members, which identifies education as among the community's highest priorities and focuses attention on all students succeeding and encourages high levels of participation in school board elections and in education decision-making forums" ([www.epcae.org](http://www.epcae.org)).



However, some businesspeople are quite cautious about such matters as school board politics; small businesses, especially, may see school officials first and foremost as customers not to be offended. Particularly in a city lacking a robust economy, school-business transactions are a highly valued area of commerce.

Not surprisingly, EPISO, for its part, sees business leaders as too timid in dealing with school board politics. Since its agenda is a broad program of human development, EPISO would like to see the education front expanded into after-school programs and other efforts to address the needs of children and youth. EPISO's school base, however, is a small one (and has declined from its peak); and, as school board politics has loomed large on its horizon, EPISO has turned increasingly to churches and the faith community to build a stronger and explicitly political base for mobilizing on behalf of children and youth. From EPISO's perspective, weakness at the school board level greatly limits the scope of concerted action. Such issues as after-school programs and pre-K childhood development get short shrift.

For its part, the Collaborative is not positioned to take on school board politics; its established point of contact is superintendents, not school board members. Hence, at the present time school boards are far from being contributors to civic cooperation. Consequently, even though consensus holds around the general goal of heightened academic achievement by all students, for some players this aim has yet to become an urgent and overriding concern. Even in a city with an impressive record, civic cooperation falls short of the ideal. To some participants on the scene, parent engagement holds promise for providing a foundation for greater civic cooperation.

### **Competing Approaches to Mobilizing Parents**

Whereas the Collaborative does much of its work directly with educators and steers away from issues of governance, EPISO sees its role as agent of political change and, therefore, is inevitably concerned with broad matters of school governance. Both organizations, however, assign great importance to parent engagement, as does the Texas Education Agency's regional office serving El Paso. The regional office spearheads an annual parent-engagement conference, in which the Collaborative participates. At present, the conference averages about 700 attendees, many of whom, however, are school staff.

A shared sense of importance notwithstanding, there are competing approaches to involving parents. With a tradition of embracing conflict as a necessary feature of public life, EPISO sees parents as a political constituency to be mobilized. For that reason, its operation in the school site itself is limited; it relies mainly on the faith community. Churches provide an independent base from which mobilization can occur and in which

overt political and leadership development can be less constrained than it would be through a school channel.

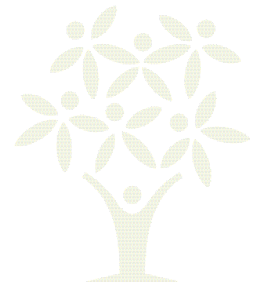
The Collaborative operates from a different tradition and a different institutional base. From the beginning, the Collaborative saw parent engagement as an essential part of the school reform process. The Collaborative starts from a perspective of standards-based reform. It holds that all parents want the best for their children academically and otherwise, but that many parents have limited information about what the academic setting consists of; how schools operate; or, perhaps, what the opening up of academic opportunity entails. Without the participation of an intermediary, some parents may be uneasy in the school setting because they themselves have limited schooling or they may encounter language or cultural barriers. Part of the engagement process, therefore, is to inform parents and ease them into the experience of dealing with schools.

But for the Collaborative, engagement also involves enlisting parents as supporters of high academic aspirations and standards. In short, parent engagement supports the goal of making teaching and learning central in the pursuit of equity and of a high level of educational achievement for all students. The aim is to have teachers, administrators, parents, and students aligned in pursuit of the same goal but, within that alignment, to strengthen the position of parents as advocates of opportunity for their children and their children's schoolmates.

Some observers might see this approach as insufficiently attentive to tensions between educators and parents. As expectations increase, parents may demand more from teachers and principals and, at least indirectly, from school boards and the taxpaying public. Whereas *EPI SO* sees these tensions as a means to further political mobilization, the Collaborative's approach is less adversarial. Through its Parent Engagement Network, the Collaborative seeks to expose parents to the idea of partnership with schools and to foster the expectation that schools will be open and inviting to parents, but it does not pursue the aim of explicit political mobilization.

All in all, the Collaborative takes more of an inside-out approach, but it is nonetheless quite systematic. From its opening initiative, the Collaborative saw parents as needed partners in increasing academic achievement. Recently, however, the organization has given the matter heightened attention through the Parent Engagement Network, which was started in 2000. The network's mode of operation is to conduct a yearlong seminar, run for a group of parents who will network with one another and with relevant school staff and who will go back to their schools and become parent leaders for engaging other parents.

In the class of 2002–2003, thirty-five schools are represented. For the past cohort groups, the Collaborative runs follow-up sessions in the spring and the fall. Hence, the idea is to reinforce past training and to maintain a growing network. This is a long-term approach that contributes only indirectly to the kind of mobilization that might alter school board

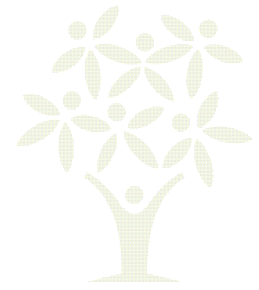


politics, but it provides a base that could have a future impact. It also has the immediate potential of enlisting parents as allies in the academic lives of their children and, in that way, helping to foster a favorable school climate for academic achievement.

EPISO and the Collaborative thus represent contrasting approaches to parent engagement. These approaches are potentially complementary, but, at the same time, they are not necessarily synergistic – their divergence may be too great.

A potential third player on the scene is an elite business group, not wedded to small-business apprehensions about school board relations but also not particularly sympathetic to what some see as the unnecessarily confrontational approach of EPISO. At this writing, this business group is exploring parent engagement as an activity that they might put resources into, but it is not clear that they will do so or, if they do, what the thrust of their effort would be – to sponsor a media campaign or to launch a long-term organizing effort or possibly both.

Few people would quarrel with the principle that parent engagement can contribute to academic achievement, but at this stage no firm consensus exists on the manner in which parents should be engaged or on what the scope of their involvement should be. Nor is it clear that various bases of parent involvement will broaden enough over time to provide leverage for altering the climate of board of education politics and to bring governance more into line with active concern about enhanced achievement for all students.



## Achievements

A major strength of the Collaborative has been the striking improvement in the performance of its three urban school district partners. TAAS math scores, for instance, have gone up substantially overall, and they have also narrowed greatly the achievement gap between white students and students of color. The overall pass rate has more than doubled over a nine-year period. Moreover, while “white” passing rates went up over 30 percentage points, Hispanic and African American passing rates went up more than 50 percentage points, significantly narrowing the gap (see Table 1). Science passing rates show a similar pattern.

Table 1. Comparison of TAAS math passing rates  
(for all students in the three El Paso urban districts)

	1992–93	2001–02
Overall	41.0%	89.0%
Hispanic	36.2%	89.2%
White	63.1%	94.9%
African American	32.3%	87.0%



The Collaborative has worked with school districts not only in improving scores, but also in increasing the number of students taking a more rigorous math and science curriculum. Consider first the enrollment in Algebra I for grade 9, deemed by many to be the key course in any push for a more demanding math and science curriculum. Table 2 shows that from 1992–1993 to 2001–2002, the proportion enrolled went from 63 percent to 98 percent. The pass rate is not quite as dramatic, increasing only from 59 percent to 74 percent; but, considering that this latter rate is for practically the whole student body, the accomplishment is quite substantial.

The pattern is much the same for the larger math and science curriculum. In two cases, Algebra II and chemistry, the pass rate declined noticeably, but that is in the face of huge increases in the proportion of students enrolled (see Table 2). Pass rates are, of course, a matter of concern, but they should not obscure the sharp increases in the number of students taking and successfully completing a rigorous course of study and in the number of students taking SATs. Especially impressive is that 70 percent of the students complete the Texas Recommended Program, another indication of the degree to which students in the El Paso area now enroll in a demanding curriculum.

Table 2. Enrollment and completion  
(for all students in the three El Paso urban districts)

		1992–93	2001–02
Algebra I, grade 9	Enrolled	63%	98%
	Passed	59%	74%
Algebra II, grade 11	Enrolled	45%	79%
	Passed	83%	73%
Biology, grade 10	Enrolled	64%	87%
	Passed	83%	82%
Chemistry, grade 11	Enrolled	32%	78%
	Passed	82%	78%

The Collaborative can also cite individual schools it has worked with that have undergone dramatic transformations. Even so, the El Paso Education Summit’s ambitious goal of having all students complete a college preparatory curriculum remains an ideal to strive for, rather than a finished accomplishment. Similarly, the 2001 high school graduation rate of 73.1 percent falls short of aspirations. Thus, even with remarkable achievements to its credit, the Collaborative faces the ongoing challenge of helping to meet the education needs of a large border community.

## Conclusion

Civic capacity is evident in El Paso in the activities of the city's Collaborative for Academic Excellence, a partnership entity at the University of Texas at El Paso. The creation and continuing operation of the Collaborative show the importance of a shared concern through structured forms of cross-sector interaction. The successful launching of the Collaborative grew from a skillful framing of an education problem to highlight its urgency and wide impact and to show how that problem could be addressed concretely. Moreover, the Collaborative has delivered. It has an approach that responds to the needs of schools, and the Collaborative's partnership with schools has yielded impressive results in test scores and in rigor of curriculum that students take.

The prominent role of the highly respected president of UTEP in setting the Collaborative in motion gave it start-up credibility, and the securing of substantial and ongoing grants reinforced that credibility and helped sustain momentum. External support has helped elicit local cooperation and so far has provided the Collaborative some insulation from the crosswinds of local conflicts.

Yet, in El Paso, as elsewhere, the seas of school reform are far from calm. Broad political currents pose significant challenges.

With a focus on closing the achievement gap, standards-based school reform is widely seen as a worthy aim. The greatest challenge facing it is not that of overcoming a body of dedicated opponents, but rather that of not being lost in the shuffle of competing causes and concerns. Any city confronts many problems and a scarcity of resources. Key players have limited time and energy; they must be selective in what they address. Sustained attention to an issue, therefore, is not easily brought about. Yet, El Paso's Collaborative for Academic Excellence has entered its second decade – a testament that problem solving need not flip from issue to issue, but that skillful leadership and structured interaction, backed by sufficient resources and know-how, can mount and sustain significant initiatives.

At the school board level, however, the second decade has witnessed significant strife over matters such as who gets school-construction contracts. Often preoccupied with bricks-and-mortar issues surrounding significant growth in school-age population, elected school board members have not been central figures in education reform. Nevertheless, despite turbulence at the school board level, the Collaborative has gone far with its classroom-centered approach, and other players are now seeking to address some of the wider issues of governance.

Civic cooperation is an unending challenge, and, in the education arena, El Paso continues to develop ways of responding, even as the challenge takes on new aspects.



*The El Paso Collaborative for Academic Excellence Web site ([www.epcae.org](http://www.epcae.org)) provides detailed information about the Collaborative and its activities.*

*School Communities that Work: A National Task Force on the Future of Urban Districts is an initiative of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform at Brown University. More information is available at [www.schoolcommunities.org](http://www.schoolcommunities.org) or by calling 212.375.9627.*