

**U.S. Department of Education**  
**2017 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program**

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[X] Public or [ ] Non-public

For Public Schools only: (Check all that apply) [X] Title I    [ ] Charter    [ ] Magnet    [X] Choice

Name of Principal Mr. Israel Castilla

(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

Official School Name Hector J. Garcia Early College High School

(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 5241 University Boulevard

(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City Laredo                      State TX                      Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 78041-1920

County Webb County

Telephone (956) 273-7700                      Fax (956) 273-7795

Web site/URL http://earlycollege.elisd.org                      E-mail icastilla@laredoisd.org

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Principal's Signature)

Name of Superintendent\*Dr. Sylvia G. Rios                      E-mail sgrios@laredoisd.org  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name Laredo Independent School District                      Tel. (956) 273-1401

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(Superintendent's Signature)

Name of School Board  
President/Chairperson Mr. Hector J. Garcia  
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

I have reviewed the information in this application, including the eligibility requirements on page 2 (Part I-Eligibility Certification), and certify, to the best of my knowledge, that it is accurate.

Date \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
(School Board President's/Chairperson's Signature)

The original signed cover sheet only should be converted to a PDF file and uploaded via the online portal.

*\*Non-public Schools: If the information requested is not applicable, write N/A in the space.*

## **Part I – Eligibility Certification**

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The signatures on the first page of this application (cover page) certify that each of the statements below, concerning the school’s eligibility and compliance with U.S. Department of Education and National Blue Ribbon Schools requirements, are true and correct.

1. The school configuration includes one or more of grades K-12. (Schools on the same campus with one principal, even a K-12 school, must apply as an entire school.)
2. All nominated public schools must meet the state’s performance targets in reading (or English language arts) and mathematics and other academic indicators (i.e., attendance rate and graduation rate), for the all students group and all subgroups, including having participation rates of at least 95 percent using the most recent accountability results available for nomination.
3. To meet final eligibility, all nominated public schools must be certified by states prior to September 2017 in order to meet all eligibility requirements. Any status appeals must be resolved at least two weeks before the awards ceremony for the school to receive the award.
4. If the school includes grades 7 or higher, the school must have foreign language as a part of its curriculum.
5. The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2011 and each tested grade must have been part of the school for the past three years.
6. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2012, 2013, 2014, 2015, or 2016.
7. The nominated school has no history of testing irregularities, nor have charges of irregularities been brought against the school at the time of nomination. The U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school’s application and/or rescind a school’s award if irregularities are later discovered and proven by the state.
8. The nominated school has not been identified by the state as “persistently dangerous” within the last two years.
9. The nominated school or district is not refusing Office of Civil Rights (OCR) access to information necessary to investigate a civil rights complaint or to conduct a district-wide compliance review.
10. The OCR has not issued a violation letter of findings to the school district concluding that the nominated school or the district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes. A violation letter of findings will not be considered outstanding if OCR has accepted a corrective action plan from the district to remedy the violation.
11. The U.S. Department of Justice does not have a pending suit alleging that the nominated school or the school district as a whole has violated one or more of the civil rights statutes or the Constitution’s equal protection clause.
12. There are no findings of violations of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act in a U.S. Department of Education monitoring report that apply to the school or school district in question; or if there are such findings, the state or district has corrected, or agreed to correct, the findings.

## PART II - DEMOGRAPHIC DATA

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Data should be provided for the most recent school year (2016-2017) unless otherwise stated.

### DISTRICT

1. Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
- 20 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
  - 4 Middle/Junior high schools
  - 5 High schools
  - 1 K-12 schools
- 30 TOTAL

### SCHOOL (To be completed by all schools)

2. Category that best describes the area where the school is located:
- Urban or large central city
  - Suburban with characteristics typical of an urban area
  - Suburban
  - Small city or town in a rural area
  - Rural
3. Number of students as of October 1, 2016 enrolled at each grade level or its equivalent in applying school:

Grade	# of Males	# of Females	Grade Total
PreK	0	0	0
K	0	0	0
1	0	0	0
2	0	0	0
3	0	0	0
4	0	0	0
5	0	0	0
6	0	0	0
7	0	0	0
8	0	0	0
9	51	69	120
10	47	63	110
11	36	69	105
12 or higher	31	63	94
<b>Total Students</b>	165	264	429

4. Racial/ethnic composition of the school:
- 0 % American Indian or Alaska Native
  - 1 % Asian
  - 0 % Black or African American
  - 98 % Hispanic or Latino
  - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
  - 1 % White
  - 0 % Two or more races
  - 100 % Total**

(Only these seven standard categories should be used to report the racial/ethnic composition of your school. The Final Guidance on Maintaining, Collecting, and Reporting Racial and Ethnic Data to the U.S. Department of Education published in the October 19, 2007 *Federal Register* provides definitions for each of the seven categories.)

5. Student turnover, or mobility rate, during the 2015 – 2016 school year: 3%

This rate should be calculated using the grid below. The answer to (6) is the mobility rate.

<b>Steps For Determining Mobility Rate</b>	<b>Answer</b>
(1) Number of students who transferred <i>to</i> the school after October 1, 2015 until the end of the 2015-2016 school year	0
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2015 until the end of the 2015-2016 school year	14
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	14
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2015	429
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.033
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	3

6. English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 6 %  
26 Total number ELL

Specify each non-English language represented in the school (separate languages by commas):

Spanish

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 85 %  
Total number students who qualify: 364
8. Students receiving special education services: 0 %  
0 Total number of students served

Indicate below the number of students with disabilities according to conditions designated in the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Do not add additional conditions. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- 0 Autism
- 0 Deafness
- 0 Deaf-Blindness
- 0 Emotional Disturbance
- 0 Hearing Impairment
- 0 Mental Retardation
- 0 Multiple Disabilities
- 0 Orthopedic Impairment
- 0 Other Health Impaired
- 0 Specific Learning Disability
- 0 Speech or Language Impairment
- 0 Traumatic Brain Injury
- 0 Visual Impairment Including Blindness
- 0 Developmentally Delayed

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 2
10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below:

	<b>Number of Staff</b>
Administrators	1
Classroom teachers including those teaching high school specialty subjects	18
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading, math, science, special education, enrichment, technology, art, music, physical education, etc.	0
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a licensed professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	0
Student support personnel e.g., guidance counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	3

11. Average student-classroom teacher ratio, that is, the number of students in the school divided by the FTE of classroom teachers, e.g., 22:1 24:1
12. Show daily student attendance rates. Only high schools need to supply yearly graduation rates.

<b>Required Information</b>	2015-2016	2014-2015	2013-2014	2012-2013	2011-2012
Daily student attendance	98%	97%	96%	97%	97%
High school graduation rate	100%	100%	100%	100%	100%

13. **For high schools only, that is, schools ending in grade 12 or higher.**  
Show percentages to indicate the post-secondary status of students who graduated in Spring 2016.

<b>Post-Secondary Status</b>	
Graduating class size	97
Enrolled in a 4-year college or university	92%
Enrolled in a community college	5%
Enrolled in career/technical training program	0%
Found employment	1%
Joined the military or other public service	2%
Other	0%

14. Indicate whether your school has previously received a National Blue Ribbon Schools award.  
Yes \_ No X

If yes, select the year in which your school received the award.

15. In a couple of sentences, provide the school's mission or vision statement.

GECHS offers underrepresented minority students the opportunity to earn a high school diploma under a rigorous curriculum, and accumulate 60 plus credits towards a bachelors degree.

16. **For public schools only**, if the school is a magnet, charter, or choice school, explain how students are chosen to attend.

Hector J. Garcia Early College H.S. is a school of choice. The recruiting process begins in early fall with presentations made at each middle school in the district. All students enrolled in a district middle school and living within the district boundaries may apply. Applicants must satisfy certain requirements: first generation college student; at-risk; and/or economically disadvantaged. Students must submit an application that requires transcripts and middle school assessment data. A committee comprised of teachers, Principal and a district representative review each application. Every applicant is interviewed to ensure that they are determined and have the capacity and willingness to partake in GECHS's rigorous and challenging curriculum.

## **PART III – SUMMARY**

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The Hector J. Garcia Early College High School (GECHS) is located in the South Texas border town of Laredo which has a population of approximately 250,000. GECHS is a partnership between Laredo Independent School District (LISD) and Texas A&M International University (TAMIU). GECHS is a small public high school with a maximum of 480 students. It recruits students from the four LISD middle schools and serves ninth to 12th grade with approximately 120 students per cohort.

GECHS mission is to offer underrepresented minorities identified as first generation college students, at-risk, and/or economically disadvantaged a start to a four year college education. GECHS educational philosophy gears a rigorous academic program that focuses on the mastery of content enabling students to succeed in today's colleges and universities regardless of economic or social background.

With a population of 95% Hispanic, and approximately 30% at poverty level, Laredo is a Spanish speaking-dominant town; moreover, only 17% of the 60% that have a high school diploma earn a bachelors degree. GECHS targets students who are identified at-risk, economically disadvantaged, and first-generation college students. The school's current demographics reflect that of our district as a whole, with a 99% Hispanic student body, of which 9.4% are identified as English Language Learners (ELL), 95.1% as economically disadvantaged, and 24.6% identified as at-risk.

GECHS is located on the TAMIU campus, which is seven miles from the closest LISD middle school. Therefore, most students require transportation to and from school. Students take the morning bus at 7:15 a.m. to school and finish their day at 5:15 p.m. With a 98% attendance rate, GECHS students exhibit determination and commitment to a college education. In spite of its demographics and challenging social factors, the school has garnished many distinctions at the local, state, and national level. It has been consistently recognized by the Texas Education Agency's (TEA) state accountability system in Closing the Performance Gap, Post-Secondary Readiness, Student Progress, and Academic Achievement in Math, English, Science, and Social Studies. Furthermore, in 2010, GECHS received the Excellence in Innovation Award. In addition, US Newsweek and World Report ranked the school as number nine in the nation in Beating the Odds, and is nationally ranked 72nd place among the nation's "Best High Schools." These recognitions are the result of consistent efforts to provide students with a robust and rigorous curriculum that focuses on individualized learning patterns by strategically and continuously analyzing student progress.

GECHS offers students courses aligned to the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) and College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS). The faculty is well versed on strategies such as second language acquisition methodologies and project based learning. The faculty is always willing to attend local and out of town staff development opportunities. Teachers build a strong bond with their students, thus enhancing their ability to personalize instruction and support for academic success.

Students attend dual-credit courses taught by university faculty. They earn college credit while fulfilling high school graduation requirements. Taking classes on the university campus, alongside "regular" university students gives GECHS students the opportunity to learn in a truly multicultural and academically diverse collegiate environment. A strong collaborative approach between the two entities allows teachers to provide focused emotional and academic support. The TAMIU Student Success Center offers students content support, including easy access to university tutors. GECHS implements targeted support during the school day, after school, and on Saturdays. For example, all juniors are required to take an American History course as part of the university core curriculum. A content-area teacher is assigned to accompany the students during university instruction in order to deliver academic reinforcement in support classes at the high school on non-designated class days. The teacher reviews lecture components and concepts, and facilitates students' understanding of material by analyzing and synthesizing key points. Furthermore, an Academic Advisory Committee composed of the University President, Provost, and Vice President of Student Success together with Superintendent, Chief Academic Officer, Principal, Counselor, and other key administrators review GECHS data on a quarterly basis.

GECHS offers students opportunities to grow socially, and with a strong sense of community. An assigned

academic Counselor facilitates presentations on topics varying from hygiene to bullying and professional attire. Through group or individual sessions, the Counselor addresses social or emotional issues that might arise with students. Students have the opportunity to participate in extracurricular activities such as University Interscholastic League (UIL) competitions in math, science, speech, writing, and debate. Other forms of extracurricular and recreational activities for students range from robotics to running. In collaboration with TAMIU, the high school hosts intramurals, talent shows, and other activities that promote social growth and cultural awareness. Through the implementation of these activities, GECHS successfully provides students with enriching academic, physical, cultural, and social experiences.

Overall, GECHS college ready students graduate with an average grade point average (GPA) of a 3.2. For example, 97% of the 2016 graduating class enrolled at a four year university or community college with 68% attending TAMIU, 5% at Laredo Community College and 13% at other universities in Texas. GECHS is determined to bridge the opportunities for underrepresented minority students to acquire a bachelor's degree.

## **PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION**

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### **1. Core Curriculum:**

GECHS provides a rigorous curriculum that prepares students for challenging university courses. Through fundamental principles of project based learning and Engage, Explore, Explain, Elaborate, and Evaluate Model, commonly known as the 5E Model, teachers provide rigorous instruction that encourages learners to evaluate and synthesize at higher levels of understanding. The core curriculum is aligned to the TEKS, CCRS, and Advanced Placement (AP) objectives. Students follow a structured and demanding curriculum that includes dual-credit courses at TAMIU. With a strong emphasis on writing and research across all areas, students are prepared to meet and succeed at the level that university courses demand. From English to Physical Education, students experience writing and project based assessments. The school has a print rich environment with the use of anchor charts and word walls. Daily individual and group work creates an environment of communal learning and support between peers preparing them for collegiate learning.

To prepare students for college level English courses, 9th and 10th grade students are enrolled in Pre-AP English I and II which follows a rigorous curriculum. As juniors, students earn their credits for English III and IV through English 1301/1302 (college freshmen English) and English 2327 (Survey of American Literature to the Civil War). Students are taught to read, think, and write critically. For example, underclassmen participate in a district's annual Literacy Showcase. They create a project based on their summer reading assignment. Students choose the media and are required to write a mini-analysis of their work. Juniors and seniors have to compose a coherent and cohesive literary analysis on both short stories and poetry. Their final papers must be polished and submitted to professors on a timely manner following Modern Language Association (MLA) format. English courses teach students the skills to analyze and synthesize what they read and to articulate in clear prose their insights.

The mathematics curriculum is aligned to the TEKS and CCRS. Underclassmen take Pre-AP Algebra I, Pre-AP Algebra II, and Pre-AP Geometry to strengthen skills needed to succeed in the more rigorous upper level courses. Juniors are required to take a dual enrolled College Algebra class; however, there are times when rising sophomores are Texas Success Initiative (TSI) ready and can enroll in College Algebra in the summer. Through the use of multiple representations and mathematical language, students take on the challenge of succeeding in university math courses. From learning to build a simple kite with geometric patterns in their Algebra class to learning how to calculate the rate of change in Calculus, students learn to apply mathematics in their daily life. More specifically, seniors in AP Calculus must construct a pen using carving tools and are asked to estimate the volume of revolution by using the shell or disk method. The project provides students with a palpable experience of how math is seen in practical terms.

Students who attend GECHS take Pre-AP Biology, Pre-AP Chemistry, Pre-AP Physics, and Pre-AP Anatomy and Physiology that follow the TEKS and CCRS. Teachers use the inquiry and exploration strategies to ensure students learn and succeed in their high school and dual-enrolled courses. Students explore and learn through hands-on activities, such as dissecting a pig to identify key organs and using microscopes to explore its cells. From the use of mathematical skills to measure weight, mass, and volume to the use of simple equations for complex chemical conversions, students acquire the experience and knowledge needed to succeed in their university science courses. In learning about Life Science, students learn to value their environment. For example, they actively participate with the Rio Grande International Student Center by gathering samples from local water sources and testing for pollutants during Biology class. Also, students learn about and test native soils to determine the types of plants that can thrive in South Texas.

The social studies curriculum is aligned to the TEKS and CCRS in preparation for the rigor and demand of dual-enrolled courses. Students take Pre-AP World Geography and Pre-AP World History that establish the foundation needed for upper level courses. Freshmen learn the geographical locations of countries, societies, and cultures through the use of maps, visuals, educational videos, and the Internet. Juniors are dual-enrolled in US History and US Government courses. Through friendly discussions and intense debates, students master rhetoric needed in producing persuasively effective arguments. For example, students in US History

1301 and 1302 learn about historical events that shaped the country, from the Declaration of Independence to the present. Furthermore, students learn about voting rights and civil liberties that form the foundation of democracy in the United States. For instance, this past November, a mock presidential election was held to teach students the importance of having one's voice heard.

## **2. Other Curriculum Areas:**

As part of the graduation requirement, 10th grade students take dual enrolled Music Theory or Art History at TAMIU which are TEKS aligned. Students take American Pop Music Through the Ages and learn how the social climate of the era influenced music by analyzing musical compositions and styles. Those students inclined towards a visual arts program have the option to take Art Appreciation as a dual enrolled course, or a Survey of Art History from the Renaissance period; They study elements of art such as perspective, colors, lines, shapes, and texture. Moreover, students learn to identify and understand conveyed messages in artwork. Students take the course three times a week for a whole semester. Students who prefer to major in the fine arts area are encouraged to take more university courses aligned to their major of study.

Freshmen take a dual enrolled physical education (PE) course to earn the required graduation credit. Students follow a TEKS aligned curriculum that addresses fitness principles to live an active and healthy lifestyle. In alternating schedules, freshmen meet with both high school and university teachers for 80 minutes each day. Students must also take a health course to fulfill high school graduation requirements. In both the PE and health classes, students learn how to make good life choices. For instance, coaches and teachers teach students how to prepare well balanced meals and to warm up and stretch properly prior to any physical activity. It is with lessons like these that students are given solid knowledge for making good health choices for balanced physical, emotional, and psychological needs.

The school is devoted to ensuring that students are provided with a robust TEKS aligned curriculum that prepares them for a global society. Students take Pre-AP Spanish I or II in 9th grade. As 10th graders, they take the Pre-AP Spanish III and/or AP Spanish Language. Eleventh graders are offered AP Literature. All Spanish courses are a semester long, meeting 80 minutes daily. All students are required to have three foreign language credits. If they want to pursue other languages, GECHS offers the opportunity for dual enrolled courses, including Mandarin I, II and III, and French I and II. All foreign language courses teach the foundations of listening, speaking, reading, and writing necessary to develop proficiency in those languages. These courses are available to students in any grade level. Close to 50 students enroll in one of these languages as part of their electives.

In addition, freshmen must take Principles of Informational Technology. Every year, 120 students take the TEKS aligned class which provides them with an opportunity to explore a myriad of emerging technologies. They learn about different hardware components, word processing technologies, databases, and spreadsheets. Students combine all skills through different media presentation tools like Web Design. In 10th grade, approximately 60 students take Web Technologies. The class offers students an array of certifications that prepare them for today's job markets and careers. Students can get certified in Microsoft Office Specialist in Word, Microsoft Office Specialist in PowerPoint, Microsoft Office Specialist in Excel, Adobe Photoshop, Adobe Flash, and Adobe Dreamweaver. Both semester classes are offered daily for 80 minutes.

Students take a TEKS aligned dual enrolled Professional Communications course. They explore the dynamics of effective forms of communication, verbal and nonverbal. They acquire the proper communications skills needed when presenting to small and large groups. For instance, students learn the steps in composing a rhetorically effective speech, from brainstorming to delivering. Students experience a rigorous and profound intellectual challenge that prepares them for the demands of any university course through the use of debate and research. The 80 minute course is offered to sophomores as part of the university core curriculum and held three times a week for a semester.

As of the beginning of the 2016-2017 school year, GECHS in collaboration with TAMIU, began offering students interested in the education field a prescriptive pathway to a degree in Education. Students declaring Education as their major are inducted into the Pre-Education Program. The National Board of Professional

Teaching Standards teamed up with TAMIU to offer GECHS students this opportunity. The Pre-Education Program, based on the principles of Respect, Integrity, Service, and Excellence help streamline students into upper level courses offered by the College of Education at TAMIU. As of today, 37 students have been inducted into the program, and will be taking the first university course in Education in Summer Session I, 2017.

### **3. Instructional Methods, Interventions, and Assessments:**

GECHS provides all students with a rigorous and demanding curriculum that will prepare them for university success. Scaffolding instruction, project based learning, prescriptive support, and targeted intervention define GECHS as a high performance school. The use of data from a variety of sources such as End of Course (EOC), Texas English Language Proficiency Assessment System (TELPAS), TSI, district benchmarks, and Curriculum Based Assessments (CBA) identify and target areas of need.

Since its establishment, GECHS practices the Common Instructional Framework (CIF) which allows teachers to create a strong learning environment. Through collaborative group work, writing to learn, questioning, scaffolding, classroom talk, literacy groups, and college readiness strategies students have an active role in learning. The CIF places the learning in the students' hands; teachers deliver new content, guide students through basic comprehension, and then the CIF empowers students to analyze and synthesize what is covered. For instance, a teacher can use a Gallery Walk during a lesson to have students address an issue or a question that arises with a text. Students have the opportunity to respond using higher order thinking skills and discuss their thoughts with their peers.

Along with the CIF, the school's master teacher plays a vital role in assuring student success. The master teacher disseminates school information vital to instruction ranging from tutorial schedules for dual-enrolled classes; AP practice testing; EOC intervention for students who need improvement, especially students that fall within the achievement gap; EOC help for those seeking commended levels; and TSI workshops are all coordinated by the master teacher. A top priority for the master teacher and bilingual strategist is to help close the achievement gap between the performance of all students and the ELL population, which is currently 5%. Furthermore, the master teacher coordinates testing schedules for local and state assessments and analyzes data to identify areas of need. Together with teachers and administration, the master teacher organizes campus initiatives that directly impact student performance. The master teacher's primary goal is to formulate intervention plans that are prescriptive to the needs of each student.

To address the needs of every learner, GECHS practices 5E Model, which enables students to extend their learning at elevated cognitive levels. As part of the adopted district instructional model, the district Learning Educational Alignment Document (LEAD) incorporates the 5E model and the Proficiency Language Descriptors (PLD) as a daily instructional process. The LEAD is aligned to the TEKS, CCRS, and integrates second language acquisition strategies. For instance, a lesson starts with a suggested engaging activity to meet the daily objective. The lesson proceeds with guiding questions for exploration on the concept taught. The teacher explains the concept in depth, and uses evaluation questions that spark interest and analytical thought.

Nonetheless, the LEAD provides teachers with a variety of resources for evaluation such as projects, presentations, and open-ended tests. The LEAD offers different forms of instructional delivery for diverse learners. For example, hands on activities and projects are great for the tactile-kinesthetic learner, while videos and presentations serve well for visual learners. With every learner in mind, the LEAD integrates ample resources to address all types of learners, from the beginner to the advanced, using the 5E model. For the ELL, the LEAD provides teachers with academic words and pictorial representations. In implementing and following these instructional methods, interventions, and assessments GECHS ensures that students are prepared to graduate from high school and successfully pursue a university education.

For the high achieving students, GECHS has in place a pathway that entails higher level rigorous dual enrolled courses as early as 9th grade. After meeting TSI requirements in all three assessed areas, students can take university core courses aligned to their declared major. All students have the opportunity to acquire 60 or more university hours, but those who are TSI ready by 9th grade, can acquire up to 80 hours or more.

Through support during school, after school, and Saturdays, GECHS makes sure high achieving students are successful.

## PART V – SCHOOL SUPPORTS

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### **1. School Climate/Culture:**

GECHS prides itself in providing students with a safe, engaging, and welcoming school setting. It is important that students and teachers feel comfortable and valued in and out of the classroom. The school empowers students to make decisions. For instance, the school motto was created by a student. Even the mascot, the Phoenix, was chosen by students. They chose a symbolically mythical and powerful creature that represents the school motto.

It is important to mold globally successful citizens by emphasizing the importance of higher education, providing a safe environment, and promoting a rigorous curriculum. Teachers hold high expectations for all students. They provide the scaffolding and intervention for those who need the extra push; encouragement is given to independent students. Teachers deliver rigorous lessons and activities with the understanding that students need to be challenged. These beliefs and values create a strong learning environment in which students strive to do well.

Moreover, extracurricular activities create a positive and competitively healthy environment. Students participate in a number of clubs such as the Running Club, Student Council, Yearbook, Prom Committee, and Robotics, to name a few. GECHS also prides itself in chartering both National Honor Society (The Phoenix Elite) and Spanish Honor Society (Ruben Dario). These nationally chartered societies recognize academically achieving students providing them with stoles for graduation gowns and seals on their diplomas. Students participate in UIL academic competitions. Students have reached UIL Regional and State levels in the last few years. In addition, the Chess Club and Robotics members have also brought home trophies and awards that are displayed at the school's entrance. In addition, the school's culture extends beyond the classrooms. The school organizes and hosts intramural games for flag football, soccer, volleyball, basketball, and dodgeball. The excitement really builds when tournaments are held between faculty and students. Also, yearly social events are planned such as the Winter Formal and Prom.

GECHS motivates and values its faculty with various celebrations such as the Birthday Club, holiday potlucks and dinners. During Teacher Appreciation Week, the school treats teachers with gifts and surprises to express gratitude for their commitment to education. However, a culture of collegial camaraderie is evident through mutual emotional and personal support. For instance, the school has found ways to offer support and flexibility for teachers in times of need. Collaborative weekly meetings keep teachers updated and focused on school goals. With an open door policy, teachers can communicate both academic and personal concerns with administration.

### **2. Engaging Families and Community:**

Administration, faculty, and staff are important in a student's academic and social life; however, another role is vital in their overall success: that of parent. A student's chances of graduating from high school and attaining higher education increases when parental and community involvement are present. GECHS strives to involve parents and community at all times, whether to promote an event or activity, or to educate on topics that are valuable towards graduation.

Parental involvement meetings are held monthly by the Parent Liaison. Agendas for these meetings are created to address the concerns parents have about their children's education. For example, one recently held was a three part workshop titled "La Chancla (The Warning) Parent Class," during which parents received guidance on how to address disciplinary issues at home.

The Parent Liaison helps with paperwork and encourages parents to volunteer. The Parent Liaison ensures that parents are aware of opportunities, activities, and meetings available to them at the district level by sending home notices. Along with the Student Service Specialist, they contact parents to schedule teacher/parent conferences to discuss attendance and to address behavioral issues. The Student Service Specialist conducts home visits when needed.

Moreover, the Counselor and the Nurse do their part in involving parents when it comes to the students' overall well-being. At the beginning of each school year, the Counselor organizes special meetings for the parents of incoming freshmen. Expectations, rules, and course load that the 9th graders will encounter are discussed. The Counselor also holds frequent parent meetings to discuss everything from high school credits, core curriculum, dual enrollment, graduation requirements, and TAMIU registration. The Counselor meets with parents concerning student behavior, and academic and/or personal stress factors. In addition, the Nurse organizes beginning-of-the-year meetings to discuss important health forms and mandatory vaccinations required by the school district and the university. The Nurse contacts parents when health concerns arise with students, and sends home important notes for city clinics.

GECHS welcomes parents and the community to partake in the students' achievements and accomplishments. The school conducts Report Card Nights and Open House events at 6:00 p.m. to allow working parents to attend. Moreover, the school always invites LISD News and local news stations to join the campus award ceremonies and other programs throughout the year. This coverage allows the community to learn about GECHS.

### **3. Professional Development:**

Throughout the year, GECHS teachers attend staff development focusing on topics ranging from best practices to data segregation. They continuously participate in local, regional, and out-of-state trainings to strengthen skills and broaden their understanding in implementing the TEKS, CCRS and higher order thinking skills into daily instruction. Moreover, teachers at GECHS attend training that are specific to our student population needs such as closing the achievement gap and writing across the curriculum. They learn to pose questions that motivate and engage all students to write.

Staff development trainings range from engaging the reluctant to the self-driven learner with strategies that engage and elevate learning at higher cognitive thinking levels. In turn, they implement strategies in their respective area on a daily basis, addressing the TEKS. In learning to scaffold instruction from basic understanding to synthesizing and evaluating, teachers engage and support students with their individual learning needs. GECHS faculty and administration are firm believers in making learning fun, accessible, meaningful, and relevant to all students. With that in mind, teachers incorporate hands-on projects that instill higher thinking skills, and builds collegiality amongst the learners.

Furthermore, GECHS faculty also participate in local technology trainings that support student engagement. They attend training on how to build a virtual classroom where students can find extra support for their GECHS and TAMIU courses. For instance, teachers are trained to use online resources and networking outlets to make learning accessible for students both at school and at home. Math and science teachers incorporate technology on a daily basis in their classroom using a graphing utility. They have been attending implementation trainings and strategies that provoke students to think critically. It is evident that these strategies have helped GECHS students out-perform their peers in local and state assessments.

GECHS teachers not only attend district training; they also attend special trainings given by TAMIU College of Education, which focus on recognizing the potential within struggling students. "Teach to Lead Laredo: Closing the Student Achievement Gap" trained GECHS teachers to identify learning gaps between subgroups by disaggregating state assessment data which in turn helped construct a target-specific plan to reduce and close the achievement gap. Teachers and administration participate in summer opportunities that are relevant to our students needs. They attend Advance Placement training held at TAMIU to better understand and prepare lessons that are aligned to AP objectives to increase students success in AP exams. Overall, the staff masters strategies and teaching methodologies which assist students in successfully passing their classes at GECHS and TAMIU.

### **4. School Leadership:**

The role of the GECHS Principal is multi-faceted. From instructional leader to disciplinarian, the Principal's priority is student achievement and success. Being the only administrator on campus, the

Principal empowers teachers to lead in their daily instruction. The Principal understands that one should lead by example in order to motivate and instill belief. It is through hard work, dedication, and countless hours of analyzing data and working with committees that establishes the foundation for making well-informed decisions that improve student success. With that philosophy, the Principal engages and empowers all to believe and work towards the common goals.

A crucial component to student success is having an emotional and social support system in place. The Emotional Management System (EMS) is led by the Counselor and is comprised of the campus Nurse, Master Teacher, and Principal. Through group or individual support students are provided with guidance for their individual needs. For instance, the Counselor plans and meets with students to discuss degree plans and courses needed to fulfill core requirements. This ensures that students are on track with their academics and successfully transition to college.

With a shared responsibility, teachers and administration work together to function as a cohesive unit. Faculty members have a delineated role within the Campus Educational Improvement Council (CEIC). It is composed of parents, a community member, teachers, and the Principal. All staff members are assigned a vital role in the CEIC. The council convenes once a semester to evaluate school needs based on data. Within the CEIC, sub-committees are formed to ensure all areas that impact instruction and student success are addressed. From budget to campus facilities, the CEIC sub-committees address items of discussion that have an impact on student achievement.

The Administrative Leadership Team is composed of the school Nurse, Counselor, Master Teacher, and Principal. The team meets twice a week to review and discuss instructional concerns. As the primary function, the team desegregates data results from CBA's, benchmark assessments, TSI, and informal assessments to identify areas of needed improvement. The team ensures that district policies, procedures, and attendance requirements are followed.

## **Part VI – STRATEGIES FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS**

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A substantial body of research shows that there are many influential factors when it comes to students' academic success. At GECHS, it is of utmost importance to establish a caring, and supportive learning environment where students can develop cognitively, socially, and emotionally.

The school follows the district's Superintendent Super 8 core values which are: to provide a safe learning environment, have high expectations, post student expectations and language objectives daily, provide daily note taking and journaling, participate in weekly common planning, engage learners, understand student backgrounds, and enjoy learning every day.

One of these core values practiced at GECHS is that of providing ongoing daily writing activities such as multidisciplinary journaling. Daily writing practice across the curriculum has helped many students increase their academic vocabulary and polish their language and writing skills. For instance, students who are identified as ELL especially benefit from daily practice in writing by having multiple chances to apply the rules of standard written English in their writing. ELL students not only write in their English classes, but they also write in classes across the curriculum. That practice has helped to close the performance gap and increase ELL success in their classwork and assessments. Also, all students have the opportunity to strengthen their writing skills across the curriculum. For example, a history lesson about the American Revolution is taken to a higher cognitive level when students take what they have learned in their history class and write an analysis about the major American historical event in their English class.

Also, as part of the Super 8, communicating student expectations and language objectives, on a daily basis, helps both teachers and students stay focused on the TEKS and CCRS. Posting expectations and objectives clearly delineates the instruction within the classroom. Students know exactly what is expected of them and how they will demonstrate mastery of both content and language objectives. With the implementation of these core values, GECHS students have successfully transitioned and completed course work at the university level.

It is evident how these practices have positively impacted student performance in all areas at the high school level as well. Students have demonstrated mastery of content with 95% or more achieving satisfactory levels or commended performance in their EOC assessments; the percentage reflects how these practices contribute to closing the achievement gap among the economically disadvantaged, the ELL, and the at-risk. Implementing the Super 8 core values has created a strong learning system for all students at GECHS.