

Part I – Eligibility Certification

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 2018 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 2012 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: 2013, 2014, 2015, 2016, or 2017.
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

Data should be provided for the most recent school year (2017-2018) unless otherwise stated.

DISTRICT

1. Number of schools in the district (per district designation):
- 4 Elementary schools (includes K-8)
 - 2 Middle/Junior high schools
 - 3 High schools
 - 0 K-12 schools
- 9 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
 - Rural or small city/town
3. Number of students as of October 1, 2017 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	46	72	118
10	52	52	104
11	32	44	76
12 or higher	51	51	102
Total Students	181	219	400

4. Racial/ethnic composition of the school:
- 0 % American Indian or Alaska Native
 - 0 % Asian
 - 1 % Black or African American
 - 99 % Hispanic or Latino
 - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - 0 % 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 2016 – 2017 school year: 2%

If the mobility rate is above 15%, please explain.

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

Steps For Determining Mobility Rate	Answer
(1) Number of students who transferred <i>to</i> the school after October 1, 2016 until the end of the 2016-2017 school year	0
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2016 until the end of the 2016-2017 school year	8
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	8
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2016	364
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.02
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	2

6. English Language Learners (ELL) in the school: 1%
3 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: 73%
Total number students who qualify: 292

8. Students receiving special education services: 1 %
4 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.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>0</u> Autism | <u>0</u> Multiple Disabilities |
| <u>0</u> Deafness | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness | <u>2</u> Other Health Impaired |
| <u>0</u> Developmentally Delayed | <u>1</u> Specific Learning Disability |
| <u>1</u> Emotional Disturbance | <u>0</u> Speech or Language Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Hearing Impairment | <u>0</u> Traumatic Brain Injury |
| <u>0</u> Intellectual Disability | <u>0</u> Visual Impairment Including Blindness |

9. Number of years the principal has been in her/his position at this school: 7
10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below:

	Number of Staff
Administrators	3
Classroom teachers including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	13
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher, etc.	4
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	2
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.

Required Information	2016-2017	2015-2016	2014-2015	2013-2014	2012-2013
Daily student attendance	96%	96%	96%	96%	96%
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 2017.

Post-Secondary Status	
Graduating class size	60
Enrolled in a 4-year college or university	82%
Enrolled in a community college	10%
Enrolled in career/technical training program	0%
Found employment	5%
Joined the military or other public service	0%
Other	2%

14. Indicate whether your school has previously received a National Blue Ribbon Schools award.

Yes No

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.

MECA will be a leader in educational innovation providing direct access to post-secondary, while developing underrepresented students' minds and character through rigorous studies that prepare them for successful integration into academic, career, and life endeavors.

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

PART III – SUMMARY

Mercedes is a city in Hidalgo County, Texas located in the deep south of Texas near the Rio Grande River with a population of about 15,570 people, with 4,170 households and 3,348 families residing in the city as recorded in the 2010 census. Mercedes is known as "The Queen City of the Valley." It was founded on September 15, 1907, by the American Rio Grande Land Irrigation Company, and was incorporated March 8, 1909 being one of the oldest towns in the Rio Grande Valley. Ninety percent of the population is either Hispanic or Latino and the remaining racial makeup includes: Whites, African Americans, Native Americans, and Pacific Islanders. Furthermore, the population under the age of 18 is 32.9%. The median family income is \$25,339 with 30% of families and 36.4% of the population below the poverty line. In 2008, Mercedes ISD opened Mercedes Early College Academy (MECA) in partnership with South Texas College (STC) in order to provide and offer a rigorous curriculum and opportunities for students to graduate with a college degree. This initiative provides students college courses at no cost, offers rigorous instruction, provides academic and social support services to help students succeed, increases college readiness, and reduces the barriers to college access.

The first cohort of students started with 60 students and since then, the program has grown to 411 students for the 2017-2018 school years. In six graduating classes since the inception of MECA, there have been 232 students (60% of population) attaining an Associate's Degree from STC. MECA prides itself for graduating 100% of students in the Recommended and Distinguished Level state graduation plans. MECA partners with STC, a community college that provides dual enrollment opportunities for all students. MECA uses learning strategies such as: classroom talk, writing to learn, cooperative grouping, literacy circles, sheltered instruction strategies, differentiated instructional strategies and advanced placement strategies and allots a bi-weekly professional development seminar for on-going professional learning with the ultimate goal of developing a college-ready student population.

In addition, MECA is committed to creating a college-going culture that provides strategies and activities for students to acquire the skills and knowledge for college success. Our school's curriculum goal is "Mercedes Early College Academy shall provide a standardized 9-12 curriculum that focuses on comprehension, critical/creative thinking, and problem-solving skills for all students to meet advanced academic performance and College Readiness standards."

Incoming students attend a Summer Bridge Program in June to orientate them to the college experience. All incoming 9th grade students are enrolled in a College Transitions class where they are orientated in skills such as: time management, study skills, setting goals, higher level thinking, and acquire non-cognitive skills. The small learning environment facilitates personalized mentoring opportunities and group studies that monitor student progress. Four days a week students are scheduled into a college success advisory period for one hour. During this period, teachers review testing strategies, individual graduation and degree plans, college entrance procedures, and have the opportunity to do enrichment activities. During Friday advisory period, teachers facilitate a character education program. Furthermore, tutorials are available after school.

A reading and writing course for college readiness is provided to all incoming 9th graders to better prepare them when taking the college readiness test. MECA is a college readiness testing site, so all students will be tested regularly on Fridays. It also includes a Friday Flexible Schedule to include national college entrance exams preparatory courses for all 11th graders and college readiness seminars for all 12th graders. During this time, recruiters from the universities come in and do presentations; administration and counselor schedule class meetings to distribute, orientate students with valuable course and college information, and to determine goals and objectives. Furthermore, all 12th graders have an adult teacher mentor that meets with them in order to discuss the timelines of college ready activities and deadlines before graduating. A college and career adviser comes in on Friday to work with students on their admissions applications, financial aid, resumes, essays, scholarships, college entrance exams, and scheduling in college recruiters.

With all the components and strategies in place at MECA, the students have become responsible, self-advocates, accountable, and self-disciplined. MECA has received state assessment distinctions including Closing Performance Gaps, Post-Secondary Readiness, Reading, Social Studies, and Science. In addition

MECA has been named to the Texas Honor Roll, ranking in the top 10% Best High Schools in the nation and state by the U.S. News and World Report and nominated for the National Blue Ribbon Honors by offering a rigorous curriculum that focuses on individual needs for all students.

PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

1. Core Curriculum:

MECA's core curriculum is based on the Texas adopted curriculum standards. The current standards, which outline what students are to learn in each course or grade, are called the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS). In addition to the TEKS, our school focuses on the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) which specify the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in entry-level community college and university courses. The standards emphasize content knowledge that stimulates students to engage in deeper levels of thinking.

Our school's curricular approach is a combination of a Systems-Humanistic Approach. The Systems approach was selected because it defines who is accountable for what and makes possible an orderly systematic analysis and review of programs, policies, and procedures. The established systems within our organization are interrelated and interdependent to each other. The input-process-output model of the system looks at things, processes, or problems in the same manner. Instead of arbitrarily solving an issue, the problem is solved systematically. The approach is looked upon as a mode of thinking that emphasizes problem identification and problem resolution. It enables an individual, a grade-level team, or department to define the problem, consider the alternatives available, and choose the most efficient alternative to solve the problem and achieve the goal. The Humanistic approach that is also a part of our school's curricular approach is anchored on progressive philosophy and child-centered movement. Because of our belief that the student is the prime consideration in the curriculum's development and delivery of instruction, lessons are student-centered. In addition, it is our philosophy that learning is the means to progress towards self-development. We strive and strongly encourage our students to learn to be inwardly driven, instilling self-motivation within the student. It is important that students learn to set and achieve appropriate goals and take responsibility for their education by owning their own learning. Our school's curriculum goal is "Mercedes Early College Academy shall provide a standardized 9-12 curriculum that focuses on comprehension, critical/creative thinking and problem-solving skills for all students to meet advanced academic performance and College Readiness standards."

The English department evaluates each student's level of reading and writing and uses these results to develop their lessons to address students' needs with an emphasis on the understanding of the TEKS, CCRS (College and Career Readiness Standards), and ELPS (English Language Proficiency Standards). Many of the ELA standards identify a set of skills students must master before they can become fluent readers. At the secondary level emphasis is placed on not only being able to read text but to comprehend text. Figure 19 in the TEKS curriculum focuses on these vital skills. Comprehension of Literary Text and Comprehension of Informational Text are addressed through theme and genre, poetry, drama, fiction, literary non-fiction, sensory language, culture, expository text, persuasive text, and procedural text.

The foundational mathematics knowledge that students acquire in early elementary grades directly affects their ability to be successful in Algebra and Upper Level Math courses. The Mathematics department implements a program that focuses on process standards with the use of manipulatives and centers to build foundational skills that incorporate cooperative learning, with emphasis on college readiness for students to meet distinguish levels of achievement. Teachers use a problem-solving model that incorporates analyzing given information, formulating a plan or strategy, determining a solution, justifying the solution and evaluating the process and reasonableness of the solution. There is extensive use of technology for math conceptual development in the mathematics classrooms.

The Science Department has implemented units of project-based learning and real-world applications to their curriculum. This method allows for students to have hands-on experiences while gaining skills that will carry forward in everyday tasks, as well as post-secondary and beyond. Science teachers focus on process skills and use scientific investigation and reasoning. Teachers provide opportunity for their students to use scientific inquiry methods during laboratory and field investigations for at least 40% of their instructional time in the science classrooms. The teachers have developed a scientific laboratory to ensure students have a learning opportunity to become familiar with the use of content-specific laboratory equipment and

exploratory learning. They have created a common lab report that students may use across grade levels. Multimedia technology is used by the science teachers to support discovery learning.

The foundational skills in social studies emphasize student understanding of the importance of patriotism, function in a free enterprise society, and appreciation for basic democratic values of our state and nation. Social Studies teachers integrate social studies content and skills and incorporate lessons in which students analyze connections between and among historical periods and events. The Social Studies Department uses data driven processes to make instructional decisions with emphasis in writing and vocabulary development in all social studies classrooms. Civic learning and engagement have been incorporated into the classroom by giving students opportunity to incorporate discussion of current local, national, and international issues and events. Additionally, students take part in service-learning projects in the community through student council, National Honor Society and grade-level team initiatives. Mercedes Early College Academy faculty have taken every step in teaching relevant material that will allow students to become productive citizens of Mercedes or any place they choose to live.

MECA focuses on the College and Career Readiness Standards (CCRS) which specify the knowledge and skills necessary to succeed in entry-level community college and university courses. Key concepts and content in each of the four core subject areas are emphasized. It is the belief that the more standards a student can demonstrate successfully, the more likely it is that he or she will be college and career ready. It is essential that teachers establish a clear connection between the TEKS and the CCRS. For example, one way that the English department can align standards is by assigning work (i.e., essay or a research topic) in which students use the writing process to complete an assignment. A student must use language correctly in order to be college and career ready. By providing this learning opportunity, students can demonstrate their abilities to use appropriate grammar and punctuation, convey a message in writing, think deeply to demonstrate understanding, and present ideas.

2. Other Curriculum Areas:

All elective courses (non-core subjects) at Mercedes Early College Academy (MECA) are available to students Grades 9-12. Pre-requisite requirements may apply. Course selection includes: Art I, Art II, Physical Education, Health, Spanish 1, Spanish 2, and Advanced Placement (AP) Spanish Language and Culture. Additional elective courses available through Career and Technology are as follows: Digital Media, Business Information Management 1, Audio/Video, Photography, and Robotics. The school follows an AB schedule Monday-Thursday. Students attend their elective classes twice a week in 90-minute segments. Students are scheduled into all core classes on Fridays. Due to the limited number of high school elective courses that are available, most students take all of these elective courses at some point in their high school career at MECA with the possible exception of Health, Audio/Video, Photography, Robotics, and AP Spanish Language and Culture. These courses are selected by students who show a great deal of interest in learning about these topics.

Through the Fine Arts courses (for Grades 9 -12) that are provided at our school, students are provided lessons and activities that challenge their imaginations, foster critical thinking, require collaboration with others, and build reflective skills. These are acquired through observation and perception, creative expression, historical and cultural relevance, and critical evaluation and response.

In the Physical Education (for Grades 9-12), students acquire the knowledge and skills (TEKS) for movement that provide the foundation for enjoyment, continued social development through physical activity, and access to a physically active lifestyle.

Through courses in Languages Other than English (for Grades 9-12) students gain the knowledge to understand the historical development, geographical aspects, cultural aspects, and/or linguistic aspects of selected regions or countries. Two years of foreign language are required as part of the state's graduation requirements. MECA offers Spanish 1, Spanish 2 and an Advanced Placement course, AP Spanish Language and Culture. A fully-certified full-time Spanish teacher teaches all three courses. MECA students who are fluent in Spanish exhibiting the ability to read and write effectively in Spanish can enroll in a Dual Enrollment Spanish course at STC and earn college credit hours that will transfer to a four-year university.

Because of the partnership between MECA and STC, students have a wide variety of electives to take through Dual Enrollment Opportunities. Some courses that students take as part of their Associate's degree requirements include: Speech, Psychology, Sociology, Drama/Theatre, Computer Science, Music Theory, Art Theory, Criminal Justice, etc. These are determined by the type of Associate's degree students have selected to follow.

Band, Boys' and Girls' Athletics, JROTC, Orchestra, Cheer, and Dance are all elective courses that students from Mercedes Early College Academy can participate in; however, all of them are provided at the comprehensive high school facilities located 0.5 miles from the MECA campus. All of these courses are offered 1st period daily. Students who elect to participate in these classes begin their day at the comprehensive high school and are bused to MECA by 2nd period to continue their school day.

MECA teachers in all elective areas are responsible for not only teaching in their area but also support their students' acquisition of essential knowledge and skills in core subjects by following the Writing Across the Curriculum (WAC) movement. Learning to write, and write well, is a crucial life skill. Not only does it help one succeed in school, it is vital to success in the real world too. Studies have shown that writing helps boost student achievement across the board because it actively engages students. It requires them to take in information, organize their thoughts, sort through all of the information received and then process it.

Ways that other curriculum areas provide academic support is by having students do journal writing, Think-Write-Pair-Share, Quick Writes, Real World writing, and research projects. Journal writing is a great way to create confident writers. Journals are an informal place for students to summarize their thoughts and think about class content, no matter what the subject. By doing a Think-Write-Pair-Share after a lecture or presentation, students can record their thoughts. Then they pair up with another student to discuss the topic. The discussion is opened up to the whole class. By having organized and written their thoughts before the discussion, students have much more insightful things to add to the conversation. Quick-writes are great to get students to do practice writing and critical thinking skills. Quick-writes focus a student's thinking. With a 10-minute timer set, students are shown a historical picture, read a quote from their favorite scientist or ask how they would use a math theory in real life and then have them do continuous writing for the 10-minute segment. Once they are finished, they can share out with a partner, or the group. In Digital Media, students create websites or pamphlets for some real-world events. In addition, research papers and projects are assigned across disciplines. These require students to be able to research a topic and write about it. The goal is for all students to become self-directed learners in a wide variety of subjects.

3. Instructional Methods, Interventions, and Assessments:

The instructional approaches that teachers use most in Mercedes Early College Academy classrooms are explicit instruction with technology-based support and Interactive instruction. The explicit instruction that is provided to students is skills-based with students being active participants in the learning process. It is used when introducing a concept or a unit of study. Teachers constantly monitor understanding to make sure students are deriving meaning from the instruction. As students' progress is monitored, the instruction is scaffolded for students who exhibit lack of comprehension of the concept being taught. With the use of a variety of learning strategies and checks for understanding, students' level of understanding and ability to apply concepts are closely monitored to ensure student successful-acquisition of the subject matter. Blended online learning with school-based instruction is used to accommodate students' diverse learning styles and to accelerate the rate of learning, taking advantage of learning time inside and outside of school hours. Interactive instruction allows for discussion and sharing among peers. Examples of interactive instruction that are used are role-playing, peer-partner learning, discussion, think-pair-share, cooperative learning, collaborative learning, jigsaw and problem solving.

The English department uses instructional supplies and materials to involve students in reading/language arts activities such as research projects, instructional activities, guest speakers, performance-based projects and interactive multimedia. The Mathematics department makes use of technology for math conceptual development such as Remind 101, Kahoot, Plinckers, Chromebooks, Professional Websites, TI Inspires calculators, and Flocabulary. The Science department also makes use of technology to further support the

delivery of lessons and student learning. These include: Science Starters, Brain Pop, Study Island, Examgen, Google Classroom, Educanon, Explain Everything, Quickey, Stemsscopes, Socrative, and the National Center for Case Study Teaching in Science. The Social Studies department uses word walls and graphic organizers (thinking maps) to support the diverse/individual needs of students and to achieve instructional goals.

Springboard Learning strategies, Common Instructional Framework strategies, subject-specific, researched-based, AP strategies, Sheltered Instruction Strategies for English Language Learners, Differentiated Instructional Strategies, Project-Based Learning, and Interventions are used to ensure high levels of student learning and achievement are implemented in classrooms as assessment data is reviewed and analyzed. Assessments used to evaluate student progress include: Chapter/Unit test, Curriculum-Based Exams every grading period, and Benchmark exams. Teachers and school leaders utilize Data Management for Assessment and Curriculum (DMAC) Solutions, a web-based software suite designed to assist educators in the development and management of curriculum and assessment data. Grade-level teams meet to review and analyze overall student performance and the item analysis of an exam. Once the findings of the student data have been ascertained, an action plan is put into place for each subject area being reviewed to align and/or adjust the course scope and sequence to address academic gaps. The action plan identifies one or two goals that are described and identify which need(s) it will address. A summary statement of the data analysis percentage and findings are included in the action plan. Areas of strength(s) and need(s) are also identified and noted on the Action Plan. Once those are determined, then the implementation plan with Action Steps are outlined with timeframe/person responsible, activities/materials, evidence that will be used to determine if the goal will or will not be met, progress monitoring is scheduled and any adjustments that will be made in order to meet the goal are also described. Teachers' common planning time is used for review of student data, planning instruction, and faculty professional development that target struggling learners, At-Risk students, and succession of standardized assessments.

To maintain high levels of achievement, our school's teachers and staff are constantly evaluating instructional practices, student performance, and strive to move the needle further by incorporating additional support for students. One practice that has proven to be successful time and time again is having what we call a BLITZ for students in smaller groups of 15-20 a day or two before a high stakes exam. The day is divided by test categories and by level of student performance – Advanced Level III Group, Intermediate Level II Group, Low Level 1 Group, and Lowest Performing Group. For example, the STAAR (state exam) English exam is divided into four categories with an emphasis on Figure 19 throughout the exam. The English teacher who is conducting the BLITZ for students divides the instruction into these categories and provides examples for each of type of item under that category. The students first listen to the teacher as she/he models the expectation, then students do a similar item as a group. Once the students have practiced the expectation with several examples, they proceed to do a few items on their own. With the guidance of the teacher, students have an opportunity to ask clarifying questions or for help in understanding the concept being reviewed. Incorporating a BLITZ to bring forward the knowledge and skills they have learned previously has proven to be successful for students who are still struggling even after other interventions have been tried. Our school has a BLITZ scheduled for every high-stakes state exam (i.e., English I, English II, Algebra I, Biology and US History) that students take. This method was also incorporated this year for 12th grade students who were having difficulty meeting standard on the TSI Math exam (College Readiness exam). Of the 25 students who took part in the TSI Math BLITZ, 20 met standards on this college readiness exam after having participated in this initiative.

PART V – SCHOOL SUPPORTS

1. School Climate/Culture:

MECA promotes student academic growth thru the values of our school. The mission and vision statements are clearly defined for promoting academic growth. Teachers are constantly monitoring student progress thru grade level teaming and daily tutoring. There is a constant review of student's goals and timelines. Interventions are provided daily in advisory class to target specific strategies, dyslexia lab for those students who have challenges in reading, and individually for students who are struggling learners. To engage and motivate students academically, the faculty and staff at MECA sets high and realistic expectations, encourages students to set short term goals, and celebrate successes to cultivate their intrinsic motivation for learning. Excitement and enthusiasm for learning is modeled daily. Students are provided with a threat-free environment, varied experiences, responsibility in the classroom and around campus, opportunities to work collaboratively with peers and staff, and take ownership of their own learning.

Social growth is promoted thru various activities and organizations. To begin with, MECA is a small school environment with no more than 425 students. Students build strong, lasting relationships with their peers, teachers and administrators. At MECA, students have the opportunity to be in National Honor Society, Student Council, RGV Lead Ambassadors, Robotics Club, Anime Club, Art Club and Radio Club. Each class (9th – 12th) has a yearly college tour trip as well as an end of the year field trip. Our 11th and 12th grade students are exposed weekly to different college speakers and recruiters that come to present information to them on Fridays. Throughout the school year, MECA hosts different activities for our students such as, pep rallies, college and career fair, talent shows, Unity Day, senior recognition assemblies, academic recognition assemblies, attendance recognition celebrations, team celebrations, community service work, and prom. Furthermore, all students have the opportunity to participate in extra-curricular activities such as band, orchestra, ROTC, athletics, cheer-leading, dance, and Future Farmers of America (FFA). Being engaged with extracurricular activities and academia allows the students to feel confident. MECA has about 70% of the student population in one or more activities. For incoming 9th graders, there is a "Summer Bridge" program to transition students to the high school/college going culture.

Students at MECA have unlimited resources that nurture their emotional growth. A character education curriculum is taught during their advisory class on Fridays. The focus of the curriculum includes goal setting, bullying/cyber-bullying and making good choices. During the week, students also earn "Spirit Sticks" (badges) from their teachers and administrators which represent good performance in academics, character, leadership, athletics, clubs and other activities. In addition, the counselor schedules presenters to present on texting and driving, cyber-bullying, student academic progress, attendance, etc. In addition, there is a college and career adviser that meets with students on guidance in post-secondary education. Furthermore, students' admissions letters to colleges are posted on the walls at MECA.

MECA motivates faculty and staff by providing holiday luncheons, breakfasts, teacher appreciation activities and gifts all week long, and teacher of the year celebration to express gratitude for their commitment to our school and students. Teachers are provided a weekly time for department and grade-level planning, and professional learning communities to work collaboratively to share best practices. Furthermore, new teachers are provided a mentor for the first year.

There is an "open door" policy so that teachers and students have an opportunity to share concerns, ideas, and solutions with administration.

2. Engaging Families and Community:

MECA provides many initiatives for our families, school, and community to engage in healthy opportunities to increase student achievement. Many types of family and community engagement are needed in school-home-partnerships to help children succeed. As an early college campus, the aspiration is to always embrace the school, the families, and the community. The following are ways a parent can be involved in the school.

One initiative that is offered consists of ten educational and empowering sessions that help create a lasting confident home environment. The session titled “Factors Affecting Student Success” is a three-hour session that provides training and tools for parents to recognize research-based skills on how to support their children. Topics from health, sleep and fitness, confidence, social relationships and many more presented. Parents are given the opportunity to role play and practice nurturing these skills. One of the unique components of this program is that the parents are part of an evening graduation ceremony where the entire family attends. This is an emotional, encouraging example of just one of the goals all parents have for their children.

Another initiative is the district parent conference. The entire community is invited to listen to and collaborate with a presenter who has a motivational message. He communicates his story that always moves the parents because of the relativity to their own lives. Also, part of our conference includes an array of booths. Colleges, businesses, law enforcement, agencies, and the schools provide information and advice to the families about numerous resources available to them. In addition, throughout the year parental sessions are offered to teach skills and empower the families.

The following is a variety of activities and informational sessions the school has to offer: Breast Cancer Awareness, Immigration and the Law, Technology, Know What Your Kids Know, CPR-and First Aid Certification, Nutrition, Cake Decorating, Jewelry Making, Making College Possible, Your Budget Your Finances, Title I informational meeting, Student Academic Progress with STC, Recruitment Presentations, "Open House", Financial Aid Night, "Meet the Teacher". All our sessions embrace our parents' active participation in their children's lives today and into the future. In addition, there are committees that parents can be part of on the campus such as: Site Based Decision Committee, Language Proficiency Assessment Committee, Parent Advisory Council, and the Student Health Advisory Council. Furthermore, parents and community are informed of students' academic achievements and challenges through teacher-parent conferences, parent portal access to grades, phone calls, parent meetings with teachers, social media school pages, MECA school web-page, progress reports, and grading period report cards.

The last initiative that is offered at MECA, is the community, families, and school work hand in hand to provide the utmost opportunity for our students to graduate with their high school and college diploma. MECA is the shining star of the community because of the success the students and staff continue to have. The knowledge and skills they possess enable them to give back to our community for a lifetime.

3. Professional Development:

The professional development model that we follow at our campus is a collaborative-cooperative model. Mercedes Early College Academy has embraced the practice of having an ongoing Professional Learning Community (PLC) within its organization. School leaders and teachers work collaboratively to focus on learning and hold each other accountable for results. The cooperative piece of the model focuses on working together or interdependently while the collaborative piece focuses on working with each other towards the same goal. PLCs continuously meet. Teachers meet with their respective departments on a bimonthly basis to reflect on their instructional practice, to consider the effect that instruction has had on their students, and to gain insights from their peers on how to improve their teaching performance. Teachers meet as grade-level cross-curricular teams weekly to focus on student performance and student concerns and with school leaders to review student progress, curriculum and instruction, and assessments. Book studies, guest presenters –“Meeting the Needs of the English Language Learner in Your Classroom,” “Understanding the ADHD Child,” “The Plight of the Migrant Child,” “Combatting Stress in the Classroom,”- and on-demand professional development in the areas of Dyslexia and Gifted Education are some of the types of professional development that teachers have been afforded this school year in response to the needs that have been identified by teachers and school leaders.

Teachers must be provided an opportunity to apply that which they have learned directly to their teaching and aligned with state standards and assessments. Professional development should provide occasions for teachers to reflect critically on their practices and to think deeply about new knowledge and beliefs about content, pedagogy, and learners. Teacher development is about deepening the teachers' understanding of

the processes of teaching and learning as well as of the students that they teach. The impact of the school's professional development approach can provide behavioral, pedagogical, and content knowledge change. It fosters deep reflection and learning where a teacher or administrator can take risks to change his or her practice where growth is recognized and celebrated.

The Texas Teacher Evaluation and Support System (T-TESS) is designed by educators to support teachers in their professional growth. Under T-TESS, the teacher's role is to share insights and think about his or her pedagogy and professional practices. A goal of the evaluation process is to include the teacher in a systematic way that assists with individualized professional growth and development. The professional development that is provided is determined by the evidence-based feedback from the appraisers - principal, assistant principal, and the dean of instruction - and the teacher through ongoing dialogue and collaboration. Areas that have been noted for development at our school include: differentiating assignments, project-based learning, and expanded training on the use of the common instructional framework strategies in the classroom. In addition, our teachers are given the opportunity to attend an AP summer institute or a College Board-sponsored training annually. They can also attend regional trainings and conferences in their teaching/content area.

The Texas Principal Evaluation and Support System (T-PESS) gives principals the guidance they need to chart their own course for professional growth and development. T-PESS was designed as a collaborative initiative between principals and principal appraisers to nurture ongoing improvement, systemically support performance, and identify performance strengths and support gaps with constructive feedback.

4. School Leadership:

The leadership philosophy at MECA is that all individuals provide life-long learning, foster academic achievement, develop positive relationships and respect among the school community, and to provide a positive climate and supportive culture. The administrative team consists of a principal, assistant principal, dean of instruction, counselor, and a shared college adviser. Seventeen highly-qualified teachers add professionalism to our classrooms, some of them with post-graduate degrees who teach and guide our students in core subjects as well as in dual-enrollment courses. The principal is an instructional leader who believes that people and not the programs determine the quality of the school, empowering and motivating them to make decisions to improve student achievement.

The administrative team and teachers are a unified, well-functioning unit that promotes high expectations among all, has positive rapport with students, parents, and staff, and collaborates with all school community to improve instructional practices and student achievement. The assistant principal routinely observes class instruction, manages the safety and security plan, and maintains parental communication. The dean of instruction manages all instruction, and the assessment and curriculum program; creates a professional development plan for all teachers; schedules college readiness tests; is an educational resource for teachers; and holds collaborative teacher meetings. The counselor advises students and provides individual schedules to fulfill their graduation requirements, disseminates college information, directs the character education program being implemented by classroom teachers, and schedules college recruiters and advisers to meet with students. The teachers deliver the state curriculum to students and work collaboratively with administration to make prescribed instructional decisions for each student. Teacher teams meet weekly to review and discuss instructional concerns using data so that they target students individually during advisory and after school tutorial.

In addition, the principal has a wonderful rapport with students and brings alive the old term of *in loco parentis* making certain that students receive the best education possible, all while maintaining a family atmosphere on campus. MECA's principal has meetings with students on a regular basis, by classrooms, grade level, or complete school student body providing important announcements in person, giving presentations on college readiness, and providing guidance and advising students on their high school and college coursework. The principal is in attendance at teacher meetings and, staff development; is present during lunch periods; is visible and accessible; works with committees; collaborates with college personnel to make instructional decisions; and performs any other school related duties.

Teachers, administration, parents, and support staff on campus are part of Grade Level Teams (GLT), Attendance Committee, Discipline Committee, Safety Committee, Campus Improvement Plan (CIP), Site Based Decision Making (SBDM) Committee, Technology Committee, Response to Intervention Committee, and Department Teams. These committees address issues, challenges, and other items that will positively affect student achievement.

Part VI – STRATEGIES FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

The one practice that has been the most instrumental for the success of MECA is the scheduling of academic support systems within the school schedule to identify students' strengths and challenges and develop individual instructional plans so that they may be successful. The academic support systems include: advisory periods, college transition class for all 9th grade students, TSI reading and writing course, daily tutoring, and a Friday schedule for 11th & 12th grade students to include college readiness activities, and a grade-level team period for all teachers to meet and discuss student progress.

All 9th grade students are scheduled into a college transitions class. Students learn how to manage time, acquire study skills, set short-and long-term goals, apply higher level thinking, and acquire non-cognitive skills. In addition, students take a reading and writing class that prepares them to take a college readiness test in order to start taking dual enrollment courses. Furthermore, students have an advisory period Monday thru Thursday at the end of the day for an hour. During this time teachers group students to address academic needs and provide interventions, including a dyslexia lab for struggling readers. For students who are doing well, there are enrichment activities and tutorials for college courses.

On Fridays, students have an hour-long advisory period in the morning to promote character education. Teachers facilitate activities and discussions about empathy and communication, bullying prevention, emotion management and coping, problem solving, goal setting, decision making and substance abuse prevention in order to create a safe and positive learning environment for students. After advisory, eleventh and twelfth grade students are provided a schedule that includes college entrance test readiness in all areas. Students are exposed to instructional material that will prepare them for the national college entrance test. Furthermore, students are exposed to resume writing, personal statement writing, writing letters of recommendation, scholarship applications, college admissions, and other college readiness activities. In addition, presentations are conducted by college representatives, administration, college adviser, and counselor about pertinent information needed for college and high school.

Additionally, teachers have a grade-level team planning period where student progress is discussed using six-weeks assessment data, attendance data, discipline data and individual student grades. Instructional needs are discussed among the team of teachers, dean of instruction, and administration. An academic contract with interventions is drafted by the team and mandatory tutoring is required. Parents are always notified via phone call, email or a parent conference with the team.

It is evident that this practice has positively impacted student performance in state and national assessments and college course work. About 96% of the students are achieving mastery in their state EOC assessments, graduating seniors are completing 98.6% of college courses and 97.3% completing 12 or more college credit hours, 77% of seniors graduating with an Associate's Degree, and the composite national assessment score has risen from 16.7 to 19.6 in 5 years.