

U.S. Department of Education
2021 National Blue Ribbon Schools Program

[X] Public or [] Non-public

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

Name of Principal Mrs. Criselda Rodriguez Flores
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., etc.) (As it should appear in the official records)

Official School Name South Texas ISD Rising Scholars Academy
(As it should appear in the official records)

School Mailing Address 151 S Helen Moore Road
(If address is P.O. Box, also include street address.)

City San Benito State TX Zip Code+4 (9 digits total) 78586-7244

County Cameron County

Telephone (956) 399-4358 Fax (956) 399-3570

Web site/URL https://risingscholars.stisd.net/ E-mail criselda.rodriguez@stisd.net

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. Marco Antonio Lara Jr., Ed.D. E-mail tony.lara@stisd.net
(Specify: Ms., Miss, Mrs., Dr., Mr., Other)

District Name South Texas Independent School District Tel. (956) 565-2454

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. Doug Buchanan
(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, leave blank.*

PART I – ELIGIBILITY CERTIFICATION

The electronic signature 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. 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, including having participation rates of at least 95 percent using the most recent accountability results available for nomination.
2. To meet final eligibility, all nominated public schools must be certified by states prior to September 2021 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.
3. The school configuration must include one or more of grades K-12. Schools located on the same campus (physical location and mailing address) must apply as an entire school (i.e. K-8; 6-12; K-12 school). Two (or more) schools located on separate campuses, must apply individually even if they have the same principal. A single school located on multiple campuses with one principal must apply as an entire school.
4. The school has been in existence for five full years, that is, from at least September 2015 and grades participating in statewide assessments must have been part of the school for at least the three years prior to September 2019.
5. The nominated school has not received the National Blue Ribbon Schools award in the past five years: 2016, 2017, 2018, 2019 or 2020.
6. The nominated school has no history of testing irregularities, nor have charges of irregularities been brought against the school at the time of nomination. If irregularities are later discovered and proven by the state, the U.S. Department of Education reserves the right to disqualify a school’s application and/or rescind a school’s award.
7. The nominated school has not been identified by the state as “persistently dangerous” within the last two years.
8. 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.
9. 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.
10. 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.
11. 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 current school year (2020-2021) unless otherwise stated.

DISTRICT (Question 1 is not applicable to non-public schools.)

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

SCHOOL (To be completed by all schools. Only include demographic data for the nominated school, not the district.)

2. Category that best describes the area where the school is located. If unsure, refer to NCES database for correct category: <https://nces.ed.gov/ccd/schoolsearch/> (Find your school and check “Locale”)

- Urban (city or town)
 Suburban
 Rural

3. Number of students as of October 1, 2020 enrolled at each grade level or its equivalent at the school. Include all students enrolled, in-person, participating in a hybrid model, or online only. If online schooling or other COVID-19 school issues make this difficult to obtain, provide the most accurate and up-to-date information available:

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	124	164	288
8	146	163	309
9	0	0	0
10	0	0	0
11	0	0	0
12 or higher	0	0	0
Total Students	270	327	597

*Schools that house PreK programs should count preschool students **only** if the school administration is responsible for the program.

4. Racial/ethnic composition of the school (if unknown, estimate):
- 0.3 % American Indian or Alaska Native
 - 3.7 % Asian
 - 0.5 % Black or African American
 - 86.6 % Hispanic or Latino
 - 0 % Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
 - 7.9 % White
 - 1 % 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 2019 - 2020 school year: 8%

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, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	0
(2) Number of students who transferred <i>from</i> the school after October 1, 2019 until the end of the 2019-2020 school year	44
(3) Total of all transferred students [sum of rows (1) and (2)]	44
(4) Total number of students in the school as of October 1, 2019	569
(5) Total transferred students in row (3) divided by total students in row (4)	0.08
(6) Amount in row (5) multiplied by 100	8

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

Spanish, Finnish

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

7. Students eligible for free/reduced-priced meals: 51 %

Total number students who qualify: 304

8. Students receiving special education services: 4 %

22 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. All students receiving special education services should be reflected in the table below. It is possible that students may be classified in more than one condition.

- | | |
|----------------------------------|--|
| <u>2</u> Autism | <u>0</u> Multiple Disabilities |
| <u>0</u> Deafness | <u>0</u> Orthopedic Impairment |
| <u>0</u> Deaf-Blindness | <u>7</u> Other Health Impaired |
| <u>0</u> Developmental Delay | <u>10</u> Specific Learning Disability |
| <u>2</u> Emotional Disturbance | <u>10</u> Speech or Language Impairment |
| <u>1</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: 2

10. Use Full-Time Equivalents (FTEs), rounded to the nearest whole numeral, to indicate the number of school staff in each of the categories below. If your current staffing structure has shifted due to COVID-19 impacts and you are uncertain or unable to determine FTEs, provide an estimate.

	Number of Staff
Administrators	2
Classroom teachers, including those teaching high school specialty subjects, e.g., third grade teacher, history teacher, algebra teacher.	38
Resource teachers/specialists/coaches e.g., reading specialist, science coach, special education teacher, technology specialist, art teacher etc.	6
Paraprofessionals under the supervision of a professional supporting single, group, or classroom students.	6
Student support personnel e.g., school counselors, behavior interventionists, mental/physical health service providers, psychologists, family engagement liaisons, career/college attainment coaches, etc.	6

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 18:1

12. Show daily student attendance rates. Only high schools need to supply yearly graduation rates.

Required Information	2019-2020	2018-2019	2017-2018	2016-2017	2015-2016
Daily student attendance	98%	97%	97%	98%	98%
High school graduation rate	0%	0%	0%	0%	0%

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 2020.

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

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.

Rising Scholars Academy paves the foundation for academic excellence and leadership via a rigorous and innovative curriculum enhanced by a nurturing system of support, community, and opportunity for all.

16. Briefly describe how your school has been operating during the current 2020-2021 school year (e.g., open as usual, online only, a hybrid model, etc.)? If different grade levels in your building operate in different ways, include this. If the school began with one model and switched to another partially through the year, include this as well.

For the 2020-2021 school year, STISD follows the “Safe Return to Work and School Plan” based on guidelines, recommendations, and best practices to provide the safest learning and working environment. The plan is guided by two principles: safety of all in their work and learning environment and clear communication throughout the crisis. To facilitate communication among district and campuses, a Situational Awareness and Response Teams (SARTs) addresses the most current Covid-19 updates to provide solutions and disseminate information efficiently.

Based on the phased in returned to school plan, the initial four weeks of the school year, RSA offered solely virtual instruction followed by four additional weeks of limited in-person instruction as the Rio Grande Valley continued to battle COVID-19. During the second four-week transition period, in-person instruction was offered to priority groups such as at-risk and special programs populations.

Rising Scholars administration, the campus Remote Leadership team and the Situational Awareness and Response Team planned and prepared so that the 2020-2021 school calendar was not delayed. Since August 17, 2020 teachers welcomed students virtually and began instruction while actively monitoring students for four weeks. This allowed teachers to gather data and make recommendations for a select group of students who would benefit most from attending campus in person. Beginning October 5, 2020 parents could opt for full-time on-campus instruction. Each

quarter, parents and teachers evaluated student progress to determine if virtual or on campus attendance would benefit their academic progress and adjusted accordingly.

While following guidelines and safety precautions detailed within the Flexible Learning Initiative and Roadmap to a safe return plan, RSA continuously adapted to provide the best positive learning environment academically, socially and emotionally for in person and virtual students.

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

Rising Scholars Academy is part of South Texas ISD who serves middle school and high school students who live along the southernmost tip of Texas, also known as the Rio Grande Valley. The district stretches over three counties, Cameron, Hidalgo and Willacy, and overlaps 28 other school districts, an area of 3,643 miles. STISD is comprised of six magnet schools: four high schools and two middle schools serving 7th through 12th grade students. As the only all-magnet school district in the state, STISD offers Rio Grande Valley students an educational alternative to a traditional school setting. STISD schools provide a personal environment, a strong scholastic program and hands-on training in various professional career fields.

Because it is a public school district, there is no cost for students to attend and bus transportation is also free of charge. Best of all, STISD schools maintain an open enrollment policy, meaning any student with the desire to learn and work hard can attend so long as he or she resides within the tri-county area.

PART III - SUMMARY

Rising Scholars Academy (RSA), located in the Rio Grande Valley, is part of the South Texas Independent School District (STISD) spanning across three counties, Cameron, Hidalgo and Willacy. STISD is comprised of four high schools and two middle schools which cover a total distance of 3,643 miles and services students in grades 7 through 12. RSA serves a predominantly low socio-economic area on the US-Mexico border and is comprised of 569 7th and 8th grade students, of which 6.2% are English Language Learners, 1.4% receive special education services, and 51.3% of students receive free/reduced meals. The ethnic composition is 86.6% Hispanic, 7.87% White, 3.69% Asian, .5% African American, .34% American Indian or Alaska Native with 1% identifying as two or more races. Established in 2015, RSA has reached a milestone in its short inception, being recognized as a top-ranking school with the #1 teachers in Texas and reaching the highest Texas Education Agency designations.

RSA invests in creating opportunities for all students regardless of obstacles and challenges faced by families and the community. Transitioning to RSA is a challenge for incoming students as they leave their home district and friends; therefore, students are provided with opportunities for team building and camaraderie before the start of the academic year using summer camps. During summer camps, pre-assessments in math, reading, and social studies are conducted for advancement and acceleration opportunities. Assessments provide teachers with valuable information on students' academic levels and needs. The data collected drives the curricular and instructional decisions for the school year while allowing progress checks and modifications during team and department meetings using the Professional Learning Community (PLC) process. Not having feeder schools slows the process of receiving student data that is crucial for creating the best education plans for students; thereby, these camps serve a twofold purpose

Through a shared vision, mission, a compact of shared responsibilities, and identified core values including stewardship, integrity, perseverance, community, teamwork, and results, the RSA family paves the foundation for academic excellence via a rigorous and innovative curriculum enhanced by a nurturing system of support, community, and opportunity for all. RSA sets the expectation for academic success and motivation for students to reach their full potential. Historically, regardless of their academic background and with individual supports, students reach above grade level academic performance while acquiring a maximum of eight high school credits as they transition to high school. Traditionally, 7th graders are enrolled in two high school credit course and 8th grade mathematics. As 8th graders, students are enrolled in a minimum of three high school courses. Scheduling of advanced courses for all students reinforces the shared belief by RSA staff that all students can achieve academic excellence when there is a commitment to provide the necessary resources and support services coupled with a staff pledge to invest the time that is imperative to execute the school's mission.

To help achieve student academic and social emotional successes, RSA utilizes PLCs in grade level teams and departments to align expectations, including common formative assessments, and to increase communication opportunities between staff members benefitting curriculum and students. As a result of PLCs, equity has increased in the classroom by quickly identifying and providing additional supports, interventions, resources, and services for individual learners. Not only are students' academic needs met through effective PLC meetings, but students needing social and emotional support are referred to the counselor, Licensed Professional Counselor or social worker for additional services.

A major component to the support provided on campus occurs during the Acceleration, Intervention, Mentoring, and Enrichment (AIME) class period embedded into the school schedule. During three-week AIME course rotations, students may receive assistance in completion of homework, assignments, or content area interventions while others participate in enrichment and project-based learning opportunities.

Extracurricular activities such as sports, academic and social clubs, enrichment days and summer camps are part of the RSA commitment and traditions in nurturing the whole child. Presentations and activities promoting physical and mental health are provided to students. A health fair in addition to three-week AIME rotations for yoga, tennis, mindfulness and healthy cooking among others reiterates the importance of a healthy body and mind. Since RSA teachers provide the instruction of these activities, students build

relationships with teachers outside their academic schedule giving them another avenue of support.

The initiatives and activities RSA provides to students are well thought out and evaluated. Much like a living document, modifications occur for the benefit of student success. To make the greatest impact on students despite navigating the school year through a global pandemic, RSA implements distance learning approaches that focus on student learning and creating safe and welcoming virtual settings. Whether in person or online, the scaffolding of all efforts provides students with a superior academic experience, additional support services, and enriching opportunities for personal growth.

PART IV – CURRICULUM AND INSTRUCTION

1. Core Curriculum, Instruction, and Assessment.

At Rising Scholars Academy, the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) lays the foundation for the development of rigorous curriculum with each content area's scope and sequence. The core curriculum focuses on student's academic growth through analytical skills and real-world applications. Instructional strategies are cultivated in a collaborative environment. Using research-based and data driven practices as well as teacher input, students needing additional supports are placed in daily English, math, science, and social studies interventions. Diverse instructional strategies, including student centered learning, linguistic supports, and goal setting implemented by each department ensure student learning is an ongoing practice. Utilizing an online learning management system, students access additional notes, online manipulatives, recorded class sessions, and differentiated assignments to address individual needs.

The English Language Arts curriculum is designed to foster a love of reading and establish a solid foundation for writing. At the beginning of the year, diagnostic tests are administered where teachers can analyze data and design an adapted curriculum for the current situation. Formative assessments are conducted throughout the school year to drive instruction and address the individual needs of students. Students who need further assistance are placed in an additional reading class which utilizes a separate curriculum to scaffold their learning.

Journaling, essay writing, and creative writing activities are woven into the reading curriculum. Whole class reading assignments with diverse novels and short stories are chosen carefully and offer students the opportunity to have deep discussions increasing student confidence and interpersonal communication skills.

Traditionally, methods such as the inner/outer circles are utilized to facilitate discussions; however, with online learning, teachers adapted discussions utilizing video conferencing breakout rooms and discussion boards to allow for cooperative learning. An online textbook and additional online programs to engage students are embedded into the lessons. Written responses are supplemented with video discussions through an online program, and to ensure equity in resources, both print and e-book novels are provided to students. Projects are produced utilizing technology and include student choice such as creating videos, social media, slideshows, and soundtracks. To motivate and encourage students, student work is displayed in hallways and on social media.

The mathematics curriculum is designed to foster logical thinking and critical problem-solving skills by applying the mathematical process to real world problems, thus preparing students for higher level course work and applications outside of the classroom. Math curriculum uses essential learning outcomes and essential questions while remaining flexible to the individual needs of the students as identified through data collection from common formative and summative assessments. Teachers constantly review data from beginning of the year diagnostics, unit assessments, and module tests to identify trends across classes and share best instructional practices.

The transition from traditional in person classroom to virtual learning altered instructional methods as well as data collection. Efforts to assess student learning includes metacognitive processes, problem solving skills, and strategy-based questions.

In Biology and Integrated Physics & Chemistry courses, students are provided with detailed instruction based on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills. Students are challenged with understanding the concepts of the Biology, Chemistry and Physics curriculum through detailed lessons that are reinforced through hands-on inquiry-based science labs. Science labs are designed and modeled with modified versions of lab reports using the scientific method. All labs include science, technology, engineering and mathematics and are designed to create products for both individual and group accountability.

Due to virtual instruction, lesson delivery is modified while maintaining high rigor. Lessons, case studies, and even the hands-on labs are conducted virtually. Science teachers create recordings of real-time lab simulations to provide the students with on demand access for reference. When the lessons and labs are

completed, the instructional content is reviewed, and student assessments are conducted. Using data from assessments, teachers collaborate and discuss individual approaches to instructional techniques that impact students' successes and apply to future lessons.

In Social Studies, formulated lessons are balanced with content driven material and student-centered learning activities. Activities stimulate analytical skills such as, Socratic seminars, document-based questions, debates, and reading like a historian. Formative assessments such as quizzes and checks for understanding are critical for progress monitoring throughout a lesson, which can determine lesson adjustments. Summative assessments are designed with released standardized questions from previous state assessments. In addition, prior data from formative assessments that identify misunderstandings during the lessons are included to determine if reteaching is successful.

For virtual delivery of content and assessments, synchronous classes are held via video conferencing. Virtual breakout sessions are essential for group collaboration or discussions. After a completion of a unit exam, synchronous days are intertwined into the department academic calendar to provide additional support and reteaching opportunities for struggling students.

1a. For secondary schools (middle and/or high school grades):

To prepare Scholars for post-secondary readiness, teachers continuously raise the rigor in the curriculum. By offering multiple opportunities for students to advance in their courses and solve real world problems in their course work, RSA students build upon a solid academic foundation and expand their necessary skills for college success. Time management, organization, discipline, creative thinking and problem solving are seen regularly in all RSA classrooms and each content area offers high school credit courses allowing students to increase their content area knowledge and explore other core courses in high school. This incentive serves students with an opportunity to enter college with a stronger foundation in each content area. In ELA, skills such as vocabulary building, inferencing and strategies to increase reading comprehension ensure students can navigate collegiate readings. The math curriculum aligns to college readiness as students are tasked with rigorous coursework that include above grade level courses and advancement into Algebra 1 and Geometry. The science curriculum reinforces rigorous thinking, questioning, and real-world application skills needed for students to be successful in college. Utilizing investigative case studies, teachers prepare students to dissect technical readings needed to understand college level texts. The social studies department promotes the school's mission by implementing a curriculum that is rigorous and relevant. Students frequently analyze primary and secondary sources that promote critical thinking and strong reading comprehension. Additionally, RSA offers two pathways, engineering and health sciences, giving students the opportunity to explore possible careers, both in the classroom and with extended activities, prior to entering high school. This creates an opportunity to steer them towards a more precise understanding of their interest before entering high school and college. Each of the core content areas, in conjunction with our elective courses, serves to provide a solid foundation for their college experience.

1b. For schools that offer preschool for three- and/or four-year old students:

2. Other Curriculum Areas:

Rising Scholars Academy provides innovative educational experiences to all Scholars. Each of the elective courses follows the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) as the curriculum foundation. The TEKS support a rigorous core curriculum and are the blueprint for the scope and sequences. All RSA elective courses are yearlong courses offered in an A/B block schedule with 90-minute class periods. Students attend elective courses every other day.

The RSA Fine Arts program includes music and art classes to 8th graders. The music program boasts 150 participants and focuses on supporting essential skills through the acquisition of melodic, rhythmic, and harmonic sight reading and performance skills. Art classes have a total of 150 participants and focus on developing student's cognitive functioning and expressing creativity. RSA's Fine Arts program contributes

to the development of lifelong skills and college readiness.

The Fundamentals of Computer Science course is a high school level course offered to 7th grade students. Currently, 300 students participate and develop real world skills such as problem solving, collaboration, communication, creativity, and technology literacy. Students utilize various computer programming languages and create websites and video games to advance their skills.

Principles of Health Science is a high school course offered to 8th graders. Currently, 163 students participate and acquire essential professional skills expected in the healthcare industry. This course is designed as an introduction for students interested in pursuing healthcare careers and clinical certifications offered by STISD magnet high schools.

RSA offers engineering high school courses for 8th grade students. Currently, 144 students participate and are introduced to the design process as a steppingstone to understand problem solving. The course uses a systematic problem-solving approach where students learn to understand real world problems, brainstorm ideas for designing solutions and create technical drawings and prototypes.

RSA offers 8th graders an opportunity to enroll in Spanish courses including Spanish I with 215 students enrolled and Spanish II with 11 students participating and challenging a national college level assessment. These high school credit courses support instructional strategies implemented through thematic units, as well as the three modes of communication based on the Language Other Than English TEKS. Students engage in a variety of cultural comparisons and grow to recognize the advantages of professionals who speak a second language to meet the increasing demands of a global society.

The Physical Education program (PE) addresses the TEKS as a backwards designed curriculum that gradually develops the skills of the student. The PE course is offered to both 7th and 8th grade students. Currently, 220 students participate in this course designed to promote a foundation for enjoyment, continued social development, and access to a physically active lifestyle. RSA's P.E. program also supports other content areas by including written research projects throughout the year.

In responding to the pandemic, elective teachers adapt courses using the RSA learning management system and ensure that hands on activities continue by providing all students with art supplies, engineering kits, health science equipment, and supplemental textbooks to students via drive thru events or home visits.

3. Academic Supports:

Rising Scholars Academy meets the needs of diverse learners through the implementation of synchronous, engaging, innovative, and differentiated instruction with integrated supports during classroom instruction, intervention classes, and additional content support courses. Since students come from different school settings and experiences, it is crucial students are supported to reach their full potential as they challenge advanced coursework. During a class period, it is not uncommon to witness students working collaboratively in groups, utilizing technology, and moving around the classroom. These strategies allow teachers to engage all learners and differentiate instruction for each student accordingly. Furthermore, the A/B block schedule followed on campus lends itself to reteaching and extension activities taking place in the classroom after direct instruction and independent practice.

In addition, students who show a gap of 10 percent or more points on standardized tests, English Language Learners, and other special populations are targeted through daily intervention programs and a supplemental reading program in both 7th and 8th grade.

Teachers address linguistic components for English Learners including instructional techniques that emphasize the speaking domain. A Reading placement test at the beginning of the school year assesses each learner's strengths and areas for growth and prescribes an appropriate individualized

program where the reading teacher tracks and monitors progress throughout the year.

One of the biggest assets in student supports is the practice of analyzing data for all content areas and sharing during weekly department Professional Learning Community meetings. However, when students need assistance beyond class time, the school schedule allows for student supports embedded in the instructional day through 80-minute AM supports, 50-minute PM supports, and Acceleration, Intervention, Mentoring, and Enrichment (AIME) courses. When data indicates scholars need specific reteaching of objectives and skills, they are placed in a three-week intervention class during AIME.

Other supportive measures are for students who can understand the course material, but who lack in completing assignments. Support for this scenario comes in an AIME homework completion course.

Furthermore, school support staff provides inclusion services for 504 and special education students in general education classrooms. Student support staff collaborate with teachers every week during team and department PLC meetings to ensure all students are receiving the support they need to be successful and are improving academically.

This year, all supports have successfully continued via video conferencing software for students working from home and in-person for those on campus. Mentoring is a critical factor in the school support system. To achieve this element, AIME functions as a “homeroom” type of class at the beginning of the year and on Fridays during the school year. Teachers and students perform team building through games, group activities, and school wide functions. School culture is taught as well as essential school skills such as note-taking and organization.

To meet the needs of the more advanced learners, enrichment classes are also offered for those who seek enriching their skillset, new academic or physical challenges, and an opportunity to serve their community. When all these components come together, they create a strong system of support at Rising Scholars Academy.

PART V – SCHOOL CLIMATE AND CULTURE

1. Engaging Students:

Engaging students is a priority at Rising Scholars Academy. To instill effective character traits, RSA adopts core values. Students who demonstrate excellence in core values are recognized during quarterly celebrations creating motivation for their peers to continue to embrace the culture.

Enrichment days engage students and are designed to explore a themed topic and build teamwork. Enrichment days are comprised of an annual health fair with activities, demonstrations, and informational sessions along with an end of the year celebration, Rocket Days, which consists of both academic and athletic challenges.

RSA offers multiple competitive and non-competitive clubs and sporting activities to engage students. Clubs and chapter organizations are developed to build a sense of community among students with similar interests and are categorized as academic, career, social and service-oriented clubs. Participation in sports is widely popular among the students. RSA students dedicate themselves to practice daily and prepare for competition against other schools. These students frequently advance to state level competitions further motivating more students to participate. A very successful addition this year is RSA esports which allowed students to compete in organized video gaming matches with students across the country. Participation in these programs promotes high academic standards, discipline, communication, and teamwork.

Prior to the beginning of the year, students participate in summer camps to familiarize themselves with the school culture and procedures. During this time, enrichment activities related to two career pathways are highlighted. The health science and engineering pathways are designed to expose the students to current trends and practices in those fields in preparation for high school. The objective is to provide an opportunity for students to meet and interact with some of their teachers and fellow Scholars. This creates a smoother transition and creates a relationship between scholars and staff.

To further engage students, rotational enrichment courses are embedded in the daily schedule. These courses seek to promote curiosity, creativity and develop hobbies to address the needs of all students. Students choose from a variety of courses such as photography, gardening, yoga, guitar, and gaming. During this time, social emotional learning curriculum is also offered which focuses on fostering the whole child through character development.

RSA continues to promote student engagement by providing multiple online platforms to attract participation by both virtual and on campus students. By utilizing online platforms, RSA increases participation in the virtually held events such as health fairs, Rocket Days, pep rallies, and club activities.

2. Engaging Families and Community:

Rising Scholars Academy paves the foundation for academic excellence by enhancing a nurturing system of support, community and opportunity for all. Communication is vital to the success of the school community. RSA utilizes social media, school website, email, student learning platforms and student/ parent portal. To engage families and communities, families are introduced to RSA core values and the goal of cultivating a powerful learning environment that inspires students to impact their communities.

Prior to enrollment, students and parents are invited to showcases that promote interaction with RSA staff. Upon enrollment, families are introduced to the RSA culture, instructional strategies, organizational skills and student supports through meetings and community events. Rising 8th grade students participate in a summer leadership camp focusing on leadership skills, goal setting, communication, and academic success. 8th grade students create an action plan for a successful school year. Students showcase their learned skills during parent presentations and with incoming 7th graders during the lunch hour.

Partnerships with the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley provide for parents and students to participate

in STEM programs that help both father/son and mother/daughter share experiences that foster self-esteem and promote college planning and community volunteer opportunities.

Parents, students and community are invited to participate in RSA's Fall Festival, fitness events, coding camps, family literacy nights, migrant parent presentations and Parent Connection meetings. The Parent Connection program encourages parents to participate in the educational and social/emotional development of the student. Community members and educators present topics that help parents navigate the educational system and beyond. Due to the pandemic, most events during the 2020-2021 school year were held virtually; however, as of April of this school year, we have transitioned to face to face events.

To promote stewardship and community engagement, RSA collaborates with surrounding cities and organizations through food drives for local pantries. RSA also hosts a charitable basketball game with proceeds benefiting cancer patients. RSA's health fair incorporates an annual color run and hosts sessions on nutrition, fitness, and personal development. Community organizations, parents and teachers lead sessions to inspire students to choose a healthy lifestyle.

To address the challenges that arose with COVID 19, RSA's "Rise Up" mental health seminars are provided to parents, students, staff, and community to help identify health issues, stressors and coping techniques. RSA's website provides information on the flexible learning plan, the health and safety plan, wellness support, and curbside meal information.

3. Creating Professional Culture:

Staff at Rising Scholars Academy is an exemplary model of the benefits to life-long learning. The staff is supported by administration when seeking to grow professionally. Both time and funding are provided in the best interest of student learning. While many curricula and specialized content area trainings afford staff an opportunity to grow, RSA equally promotes trainings geared towards increasing student engagement and achievement. The balance of trainings in curriculum design, instructional innovation and building relationships propels RSA's staff to excellence.

Peer observations are conducted within each department and across teams to share effective teaching strategies while also providing insight for areas of growth. Feedback is shared in accordance with established norms allowing for constructive criticism while sustaining a positive environment. As teachers are exposed to varying teaching styles and classroom practices, they adapt and improve instruction ultimately benefitting students.

Due to Covid-19, shifts in the delivery of instruction are essential for student achievement. All of RSA's instructional staff, including paraprofessionals in the classroom, attended a multi-day, in depth training for conducting hybrid learning while maintaining the integrity of the curriculum. The practice of creating well developed lessons, embedded with technology rich strategies, are instrumental during the transition period.

To promote a positive professional culture and recognize staff members who exude the spirit of RSA core values, staff members are recognized during faculty meetings. Nominations are by their peers, and tokens such as certificates, shirts and mugs are given to staff. These items are often seen by the students relaying the message that core values are shared and essential to the RSA community.

Administration sets the tone for a positive professional community. At RSA, the administration recognizes that for a true Professional Learning Community to be successful, teachers require time. In addition to the weekly PLC meetings, each department selects a day to receive the "gift of time." This is a day of planning, curriculum designing, desegregating data, formalizing instructional contracts, or other time sensitive tasks as a grade level department. The administration is also encouraging of continued professional growth. Many teachers have received or are pursuing their master's degree in areas of curriculum and instruction, administration, and counseling. Teachers in graduate studies programs engage in campus leadership opportunities to put in practice what they are learning in their course studies. The RSA professional community is positive, motivating, enriching, supportive, innovative, and rewarding.

4. School Leadership:

The overall school leadership philosophy at Rising Scholars Academy is to develop teacher leaders and provide opportunities for growth by sharing the leadership role. There is a great emphasis on growing professionally by providing many opportunities to lead within the school community.

One area of teacher led leadership is the role of team leader. Each teacher team leader is charged with formulating a weekly plan and agenda for meetings. The team leader is a vital component in organizing Professional Learning Community meetings which are instrumental in identifying students needing supports, coordinating campus enrichment activities, organizing support services.

Another leadership role is that of the department chair. Departments meet weekly to review curriculum, create common formative assessments, identify department needs, and plan for students. Campus administration and support services attend the weekly team and department meetings to serve as mentors, facilitators and provide support to those in leadership roles. A Campus Leadership Team has been implemented where all team and department leaders meet with administration along with support services such as Special Education, to facilitate communication, expectations and campus initiatives. The roles of the team and department leaders rotate every two years to provide an opportunity to grow leadership skills among all staff members. Leadership roles and planning continue as usual this year, modifying only the meeting methods by utilizing a videoconferencing platform instead of meeting in person.

In addition to academic leadership roles, RSA provides many leadership opportunities for teachers to develop their planning and organizational skills. Many of these roles include chairing committees for events such as pep rallies, health fairs, Rocket Days, festivals. Due to Covid-19, teacher-led drive thru events facilitated access to instructional materials and awards for students. The chair is essential in coordinating volunteers, executing the mission, and providing support to their fellow teachers to achieve school goals. While the campus administration facilitates RSA events, there is latitude for teacher leaders to exercise independent judgment. This is true to the school administrators' belief that there is a leader in each staff member and that true leadership helps extract those leadership qualities within.

While the academic expectations for staff and students remained the same, the RSA administration provided additional support with the creation of a remote leadership team in March 2020 comprised of teachers, counselors, technology staff, nurse and administration. This leadership team built a foundation to ensure a smooth transition into virtual learning.

5. Culturally Responsive Teaching and Learning:

Rising Scholars Academy is committed to instilling an appreciation for diversity, tolerance for opposing viewpoints and respect for all students. RSA provides unique opportunities to come together as a community and cultivate a system of support for students such as the mentoring of school ambassadors to seek out students sitting by themselves during lunch to engage them in conversation, introduce them to other students and provide encouragement for building peer relationships.

The RSA culture begins with a summer camp where 8th grade students mentor incoming 7th graders to build a sense of belonging. Further teambuilding takes place during quarterly pep rallies where students are tasked with academic and physical team challenges to increase participation from diverse participants with varied abilities. To promote the physical, social and emotional well-being of students, RSA partners yearly with community organizations and agencies to host a health fair and festivals. Students participate in the district's Superintendent's cup which offers multiple coed sporting and academic competitions.

In response to the mental health toll brought by Covid-19 and current national events, RSA introduced recurring webinars hosted by the Licensed Professional Counselor in cooperation with

school counselors and social worker to address triggers, stressors and coping techniques for families. For students affected by the loss of loved ones due to Covid-19, a newly created student grief support group provides counseling and family resources to their family members.

RSA addresses current state and national events in modern America by incorporating them into social studies lessons. The social studies department relates these issues to past historical events, current laws and constitutional rights. Open discussions assist the students' development of understanding, inclusiveness and respect towards other cultures, ethnicities and religions. Further building of community and acceptance of diversity is built into the Acceleration, Intervention, Mentoring and Enrichment curriculum that is part of the daily schedule for all students. Weekly lessons target various social emotional topics and character building to foster an appreciation of diversity, equity, and inclusion.

To provide tangible support to all students and promote equity, RSA provides technology and equipment to all students. The campus library boasts a well-balanced and diverse collection of materials inclusive of the LGBTQ community, minority authors and varied cultural viewpoints. With the addition of a unisex restroom, RSA is further establishing that a nurturing and welcoming environment is a priority. Every accommodation, activity and event Rising Scholars Academy implements creates an opportunity for individual growth, increased tolerance and mutual understanding.

PART VI - STRATEGY FOR ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Rising Scholars Academy takes pride in effectively implementing Professional Learning Communities. Each PLC holds the same commitment and expectations using four guiding and essential questions to drive discussions: What do we expect our students to learn? How will we know if they are learning? How will we respond when they don't learn? How will we respond if they already know it? Team and department leaders receive training in facilitating professional learning communities so that meetings are structured to positively impact student success.

RSA utilizes a campus-based database to address and monitor efforts of support for students of concern (SOC), such as parent contact, best practices, and next step action plans. Utilizing that database, team leaders determine which students will be discussed during weekly meetings maximizing time for solution driven discussions and potential parent meetings. In addition, specifically during PLC content meetings, teachers review and analyze assessment data that drives their future instruction and determines intervention groupings. During the data-analysis process, teachers collaborate by sharing best practices and instructional strategies that have the greatest impact on student achievement. Plans for reteaching are also created, and if teachers determine additional support or resources are required, department needs are addressed.

One significant component of the strategic PLC groups is the common planning period. During department planning time, teachers work together to create daily and unit lesson plans, assessments, and review student work to further align and improve instruction. During academic team planning periods, the team of teachers schedule student and parent meetings to have the greatest impact on their growth and success.

RSA teachers have positively adapted to working and collaborating in PLCs virtually; therefore, practices remain the same. Faculty and staff utilize an online web conferencing platform to conduct weekly meetings. Through PLC's, the RSA community including the front office staff, paraprofessionals and library staff support student learning through the Covid-19 pandemic. The inclusion of the additional support staff has created a stronger network where everyone holds each other accountable for student success. Through the strategic implementation of Professional Learning Communities at RSA, students are on track to achieve desired results and teachers can support each other as they continue to work diligently to achieve academic success for all students.