Telling the stories of success that happen in our schools and communities everyday is essential if we want to balance the national conversation about education. Armies of smart, resourceful, compassionate people are changing lives, and it isn’t for money or fame. They are driven by something that President Woodrow Wilson said eloquently:

You are not here merely to make a living. You are here in order to enable the world to live more amply, with greater vision, with a finer spirit of hope and achievement. You are here to enrich the world, and you impoverish yourself if you forget the errand.

The three stories collected here illustrate the power of that thinking.
The Aurora University Institute for Collaboration brings together leaders from business, non-profit, academic, and other sectors to find solutions to challenges faced by the community. Their charge is to "enhance the well-being and academic achievement of local students."

This story, the story of the Aurora University Institute for Collaboration, could very well fill a dissertation. Dr. Sherry Eagle, the Institute director, brought together an unusual group of leaders and challenged them to work together with the goal of developing the best possible content and support for students in the community.

What are the basics?

In plain terms, stakeholders from the community are now united in an effort to provide the best possible learning options for students. They worked together as partners for two years, developing curriculum for a specialized, STEM magnet school. The school is up and running and the partners are still involved, supporting the program with their time, involvement, and dollars.

Leaders in business, government, and education worked together as partners to create an innovative and effective curriculum for Aurora students. Buy-in is ongoing and the community remains very invested in the success of the program.

How did community leaders get involved?

Dr. Eagle met with community and business leaders, asking them to become active partners in creating a "curriculum that prepares students to do the work to be done," as she so succinctly put it.

She told me that her invitations were all well received, several prominent business leaders signing on right away. They had a vested interest in education and the skills and experience that made them valued and valuable contributors to the project.

"Businesses are sincere about offering their human and intellectual capital to build and sustain this school, so we don’t ask them to advise; we ask them to create," Dr. Eagle explained.

Once the team was assembled, they created a framework. This took time, but they wanted to establish their goals before planning the journey. The group toured a recycling facility and other real-world businesses, noting the skills and experiences workers needed to be successful in each.

Dr. Eagle said of this process, "You’ve got to listen and learn and understand what is needed by those who are going to be hiring our people."

The research, site visits, and collaboration gave the group direction and cohesion. A genuine spirit of cooperation developed as educators and community members each offered their knowledge and perspective. Once a partner became involved in the process, he or she got invested.

What’s the magic?

“The magic we have going on is sincerity, no egos; the magic is that we are asking them to be participants and creators; that is the lynch pin.”

Can this model be replicated?

“It’s incredibly replicable,” Dr. Eagle said, "but the excitement is in the creation of a new story. They are showing up to their program, not our program. That’s the difference. You have to let go and know it is their program.”

What do your industry partners think of the program?

Steve Solomon, Vice President of Corporate Relations at Exelon and President of the Exelon Foundation, is an active partner and supporter of the program. He said, “This collaborative approach to curriculum development and school involvement is like nothing I’ve seen before. It has changed the way we think about grant making and how we can collaborate more effectively with other partners on future projects.”

Where can I learn more?

If you would like to find out more information about the Aurora University Institute for Collaboration, visit goo.gl/i31Bt9.
We don’t teach math and reading, we teach children,” David Thompson, Director of Students Services at Buncombe County Public Schools in Asheville, North Carolina, told me in a recent interview. “A big reason students struggle academically is due to mental health issues, and that impacts achievement.”

Most educators know all too well what David is talking about. Some students face tremendous stress, including poverty, family issues, or other emotional situations that hinder their learning.

The human brain, when under this type of stress, is overtaken by the limbic system (“fight, flight, or freeze”). The brain cannot process information effectively and executive function skills (attention, control, and personal agency) are often impaired.

The Whole Child

What is Social Emotional Learning (SEL) and why does it work? David explained, “Educating the whole child means making citizens of people. We need to be asking how we can make kids better learners and help them overcome problems and challenges.”

An SEL program establishes specific language for discussing emotional management issues, identifies student mental health needs, and teaches all students, faculty, and staff strategies for stress management, problem-solving, and self-regulation.

Buncombe County is using “Evo Social & Emotional” from Apperson, which includes the Devereux Student Strengths Assessment (DESSA), via the Apperson web platform. Students are screened for eight key social-emotional competencies that are linked to a child’s success in school and in life.

SEL is informed by research from a number of disciplines. According to the Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning (CASEL), Social Emotional Learning (SEL) programming “improved students’ achievement test scores by 11 to 17 percentile points, indicating that they offer students a practical educational benefit.”

SEL in Action

At the beginning of the year, teachers screen students with a short, eight-question form, the DESSA Mini. If a student needs additional help based on those results, a long form test to identifies strengths and opportunities for growth is administered. In general, about 20% of students will need the longer, 36-item assessment.

In Buncomb County’s first screening, 19% needed additional help. Of that group, 56% were reassessed for problem-solving strategies.

“We were afraid that teachers would be overwhelmed having one more thing to do, but they are very excited about having this option. They see that this approach is making a difference in student learning, performance, and interactions,” David reported.

Additional mental health resources, including additional school counselors, more health care providers who accept Medicaid, and earlier intervention, are also part of the Buncomb County solution. Changes in the classroom and school culture support student growth, but community understanding and commitment to the SEL model is also important.

“We are working to embed the curriculum and interventions pervasively through our culture, mostly at the elementary level. We use yoga or crossing the midline to calm emotions and re-engage the brain. And our teachers and staff are encouraged to focus on self-care and strategies for themselves as well as their students. It’s good for everyone.”

About Apperson

Apperson’s K-12 assessment solutions help educators develop a 360° panorama of the student and their strengths, as well as areas of opportunities, that can inform curriculum decision-making and create positive learning outcomes. They support and encourage a holistic learning and development approach by helping teachers turn assessment data into actionable information.

www.apperson.com/k12.

Pricing and Availability for Evo Social & Emotional

Beginning licenses start at $299 per site. Educators may also sign up for a free 60-day trial.
Visionaries look at stark reality and see possibility, and few places in Texas are as full of stark reality as the Rio Grande Valley. This region includes eight counties that border Mexico and the top two poorest cities in the U.S. (as of 2013) - McAllen-Edinburg-Mission (#1) and Brownsville-Harlingen (#2)\(^1\).

With unemployment rates over 10% and more than one third of households existing below the poverty line, opportunities in the Valley are limited. But despite the obstacles, some residents are determined to transform the region into a hub for high-tech learning and business. It may seem like a tall order, but the difference these visionaries of the Valley are making is dramatic enough that even Washington D.C. has taken notice.

**Code the Town**

Code the Town is an effort by the Mission Economic Development and its partners, Sylvan Learning RGV and Border Kids Code, that supports STEM and technology education. This public/private partnership is unique to the Mission community, and it is setting the pace for innovative alliances that can drive educational and economic progress in communities nationwide according to their executive summary.

Alex Meade, Mission EDC CEO, is the driving force behind Code the Town. He believes that technology education has the potential to transform the community. Code the Town, which provides learning opportunities for all residents, not just teachers and students, is designed to attract high-tech businesses to the region with incentives and a future-ready workforce that is being educated today.

“Technology permeates our everyday lives, at home and in business. If we are to remain competitive, we must better understand the language and skills to master this technology,” Alex says of the project.

In his quest to build support and investment for technology education, Alex often tells people, "We may not have the experience, but we have the *ganas* (drive or desire).”

In September 2015, the White House recognized Code the Town for its "*ganas,*" naming the program a "Bright Spot" in Hispanic Education.

**Border Kids Code**

Marcos and Dalinda are both visionaries in McAllen. The two educators kept discussing ways that training students for the future could impact kids and the community. What could they build that would make a difference? What resources could they create to support technology education?

The pair started a coding camp with eight kids in the back room of a local business and Border Kids Code was born. By word of mouth, the little group in McAllen grew from eight to thirty-six. Marcos and Dalinda soon saw that since coding is a language, a camp wasn’t really enough. Students needed ongoing practice and support. The visionary pair began offering PD for teachers and encouraged them to start after-school coding clubs. To keep the teachers and students engaged, they create monthly challenges for the groups and plan to host a large coding event this coming April.

“Throughout this experience, we’ve been resourceful and have never turned down an offer of help or support. Businesses and individuals have given what they can. We are all committed to closing this technology gap for our kids. It’s a community effort,” Marcos said of the project.

**Con Ganas**

Transforming the Valley into a tech-savvy community of the future will take time. They may not have all the resources they need to make this process easy, but the visionaries and residents are moving forward “con ganas.” Working together, determined, they are making the change happen with whatever they can.

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**Resources:**

White House Initiative on Excellence in Education for Hispanics: [sites.ed.gov/hispanic-initiative](http://sites.ed.gov/hispanic-initiative)

Border Kids website: [www.borderkids.us](http://www.borderkids.us)

Code the Town: [www.codethetown.com](http://www.codethetown.com) ●

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\(^1\) [247wallist.com/special-report/2012/10/04/americas-poorest-cities/](http://247wallist.com/special-report/2012/10/04/americas-poorest-cities/)