**Options and Innovations Propels a Texas District From “D” grade to “B”**

Part 1 of 2 from the series on district transitions

**District Profile: Manor, TX, Independent School District**

**Student Population:**

• Primary populations: Hispanic/Latino: 65%+; African American: 20%+; White: 17%+

• Enrollment: 9,463 Pre-K-12

• Economically disadvantaged: 79%

• New students annually: 600-1,000

When Superintendent Dr. Royce Avery came to Manor ISD three years ago, he walked into a district in transition that faced numerous challenges. These included a “revolving door” of district leadership, a history of academic underperformance, and a fast-growing population of students, many of whom were economically disadvantaged and either English language learners or from homes where English was not spoken.

**Strategic Change**

Determined to disrupt long-held low expectations and to encourage new pride and confidence in the district, Dr. Avery’s vision was to instill the belief that excellence could be achieved.

The new superintendent developed a strategic five-year plan that would offer choices to learners. The district would focus on three areas of academics: Fine Arts, New Tech, and the academically rigorous International [Baccalaureate](https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1JZAP_enUS692US692&q=Baccalaureate&spell=1&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi466n17fvkAhWLsJ4KHWFmCW4QkeECCC0oAA) (IB) program.

With the motto, “Growth Through Innovation,” Avery and district educators set about achieving the first steps of the plan. Part of that plan involved creating a new school culture, which included the institution of more parent involvement and a standard mode of dress to level the playing field. Another goal was to offer families and students choices of academic paths in all district elementary and middle schools.

With a New Tech High School already existing, under Avery’s watch that program was expanded and the Fine Arts Academies and International Baccalaureate schools were established.

“Kids love having choices. It’s a way for them to find their niche,” says Avery.

**Quick Progress**

To assure that students receive the best kinds of experiences, Avery oversees yearly improvements to all programs. The Fine Arts Academies have new dance and art studios and incorporate music, choir, and other arts into academics. The New Tech schools provide iPads to each student, emphasize coding, robotics, and broadcasting skills in the academic curriculum, and are bringing new connectivity to students at home and school through a bond-financed upgraded infrastructure.

The IB program is introducing global influences to students and parents, with the current pilot of a dual language program, and exposure to Hispanic and African American heritages integrated into the teaching of math, science, and social studies. In the works are efforts to incorporate additional cultures, including Chinese and German.

After just three years, the Manor ISD now has; three Fine Arts Academies (two elementary and one middle); four International Baccalaureate schools (three elementary and one middle); and five New Tech schools (four elementary, one middle, and one high school).

**College and Career Preparation**

Further broadening school options, Dr. Avery has overseen the implementation and expansion of other high school programs aimed at college and career preparation. These include the Manor Early College High School program which originally had just 15 students and has now grown to more than 150 students in the new freshman class alone, and the Career and Technical Education certifications program.

Students in the Early College program, many of whom are underrepresented in higher education, are given access to college-level courses with full tuition and books paid for by the district. Manor estimates the savings at more than $20,000 per family, and students graduate with AA degrees, ready to move directly into their junior year at a four-year college.

The district also now offers twelve different Career and Technical Education certifications to all high school-age students. A sampling of certifications includes: Architecture and Construction; Arts, AV Technology and Communications; Business Management and Administration; and Information Technology.

Also new is a districtwide Pre-K center and an online parent engagement tool, Let’s Talk, which lets the district “take the pulse” of what parents and educators are feeling, says Avery.

**MindPlay Reading Interventions**

Manor has also instituted a range of additional programs to aid students academically.  “MindPlay is at the forefront of our literacy development and improvement,” says Dr. Avery.

With current research emphasizing the importance of early detection and intervention for struggling students, Manor has now implemented the MindPlay Universal Screener for every student in grades three through nine. While most interventions are at the elementary level, many middle and high school students are also using the program to strengthen reading fluency and comprehension. Results have been significant across all grade levels.

**Reaping Rewards**

After pushing the staff hard, says Avery, district students and educators were excited to reap the dividends this year, which propelled them from a Texas Education Agency (TEA) “D” grade to a “B” in just one year.

Other specific wins include one elementary school which earned an A rating this year. The school is currently an International Baccalaureate candidate school and is likely to be a full IB school within one to two years. A second IB-candidate elementary school went from a 59 on the TEA accountability ratings to a 79, one point short of a B, in just one year.

Reading improvement~~s~~ on state tests over the past three years include: fourth-grade reading up from 58 to 66; fifth-grade reading up from 58 to 71; sixth-grade reading up from 50 to 59.

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After Superintendent Royce Avery assumed leadership of the struggling Manor Independent School District three years ago, he wasted no time in helping the education community craft a vision for the future. With a focus on three areas: Fine Arts, New Tech, and the rigorous International [Baccalaureate](https://www.google.com/search?rlz=1C1JZAP_enUS692US692&q=Baccalaureate&spell=1&sa=X&ved=0ahUKEwi466n17fvkAhWLsJ4KHWFmCW4QkeECCC0oAA) (IB) program, the district moved swiftly forward with a range of new academic choices for its students and families. Part 1 of this series details the journey to date.

In Part 2, we look at the impact on the Manor community, how students, educators and parents feel about the district’s improvement efforts, and Dr. Avery’s tips for other superintendents.

**Impact on the District and Community**

When Superintendent Avery assumed leadership of the district, parent engagement and communication with the school community and the broader local community became another priority. Today, regular educator surveys and the online Let’s Talk parent engagement tool have streamlined the process of allowing all stakeholders to provide ongoing input. Parent concerns are also addressed in a timely manner through regular phone and email communication. “Parents appreciate that the school is responsive,” says Avery.

About the success of the IB program, which includes one elementary school earning an “A” rating and a second, formerly low-performing elementary school nearing a “B,” Avery says the program has impacted the district culture by reassuring both students and parents that Manor learners have what it takes. “Putting kids at the forefront of a global perspective has changed parent and teacher views. The mindset now is that students have the ability and can perform when expectations are high,” he says.

Manor’s move out of low performance status from a “D” to a “B” grade was an exciting outcome for everyone, says Avery. “We pushed the educators hard, but it paid off. We didn’t know it would return such a big dividend.”

As MindPlay noted in an earlier post, Manor was proud to boast of their achievement in a local billboard entitled, “Making our Way to Greatness.”  “If you don’t tell your story, somebody else will tell it in a negative way,” says the innovative superintendent.

**Stakeholder Voices Showcased**

To further broadcast the success of their approach, the district crafted a moving video, [Making Our Way to Greatness](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5oppJ-3sqHc), that showcases the voices of district educators, parents and students. Among the feedback from these stakeholders are testimonials on how the IB program has inspired student confidence, allowed learners to get ahead by graduating high school with an Associates of Art (AA) degree, and instilled character and discipline in students through the music, choir, art, and dancing Fine Arts programs. In the New Tech area, learners report new skills in robotics, broadcasting, coding and other technologies, but also in coping and cooperative learning.

**Tips for Other Superintendents**

For other superintendents who may be up against similar challenges to those faced by Dr. Avery upon his arrival at Manor ISD, Avery says hope is key.  “I’m a very hopeful kind of person. The school district will embrace change if you stick to your vision and overcome the challenges.”

Another key, he says, is to let data guide the way, and be able to make adjustments as you proceed. “For instance, we learned not to wait to share successes. When we have our regular meeting of principals or other school leaders, they need to talk to each other.”

Lastly, he says, innovation is central. “It provides opportunities for leadership and for new ideas. Innovation is everyone’s friend.”